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The Sexual Self and Social Work and Policy, or, Why Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Programmes miss the Point

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1 Researching Everyday Sexuality

Empirical projects that relate to sexuality often focus on better understanding social problems, injustices and health burdens. Such a focus translates into research 'on' minority groups. Historically, for example, medical and caring professions have extended these foci towards the pathologising and oppression of people who experience same sex attraction and relationships. On the other hand, research examining resilience—the ability to thrive despite traumatic experiences—has been of recent empirical interest in the social sciences (Kolar 2011). Interest in resilience has had utility in a range of social work areas of practice, particularly work with children (Masten & Coatsworth 1998). Sexuality studies first gained purchase in the social sciences through the work of early sexologists such as Kinsey (1953) and Masters and Johnson (1966) and this work emerged from large scale studies with 'ordinary' people. Although globalizing forces impact upon sexuality, sexual identity and human rights in various, culturally evident ways (Altman, 2001, 2004), there is "…a growing dichotomy between the sort of research engaged in by much of academia and the experience of most people outside the university" (Altman, 2008p 24). This present study therefore examined the everyday sexual self and its focus was on day-to-day sexuality from a non-pathologised, sociological perspective.

2 The Sexual Self in Contemporary, Western Society

The self in its temporal setting is increasingly of interest because of the rapid shifts in contemporary social life. For example, recent technological advances have changed ways in which everyday life has been lived out: the handheld mobile device, unheard of thirty years ago is now ubiquitous. This consideration of the self in contemporary life is made sense of through scholarship about late modernity.

For example Giddens' periodization argues that the self is primarily shaped and largely influenced by external, social and historically significant movements such as the movement of women into the paid workforce (Giddens 1992). Similarly, Giddens argues that there has been a 'transformation of intimacy' (1992) in recent times which has seen the unprecedented rise of equality in intimate partnerships. This so-called pure relationship refers to:

… a situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfaction for each individual to stay within it (Giddens 1992, p. 58).

Although Giddens' theory of intimacy goes some way to account for the shifting patterns of relationships in late modernity, it neglects the everyday level of social life. For example,

although Giddens acknowledges that late modern relationships cannot all be defined in positive terms his analysis focuses on individual pathology (such as 'addiction' or 'ontological security' rather than social issues (see, for example, Giddens 1992, p. 90). This means that his periodization combined with the focus on broader social issues does little to account for the ways in which individuals, through their day-to-day lives, encounter inequality. A far more promising approach comes from Mead's theory of sociality. Unlike Giddens, Mead's social relations are central to producing identity rather than being passively connected to it. For Mead, "all selves are constituted by or in terms of the social process" (1934, p. 20). Applications of Meadian notions of self constitution argue for their utility in understanding the everyday sexual self (Jackson 1997, 1999; Jackson & Scott 2010).

George Herbert Mead's notion of the social is as a social in action and interaction; a social made up of *processes*. Thus, individual identity is 'made' through interactions with others. The finding of this study into sexuality is that the sexual self is constituted through social processes (Jackson & Scott 2010a). This means that the sexual self is shaped and continues to be produced through sociality where relationships are central"

Since it is a social self, it is a self that is realized in its relationship to others. It must be recognized by others to have the very values which we want to have belong to it (Mead 1934, p. 204).

It is through the application of the Meadian theory of self helps that a better understanding of the sexual self becomes possible (Jackson & Scott 2010a, 2010b). The data from this study reveal relationships in social life as being significant to sexual self-constitution. These relationships were coded by participants as significant through the explanation of how these 'fit' with their broader biography. Social interaction through both work and education were overwhelmingly cited as significant to sexual self-making. We now examine data relating to each of these.

3 Education

Participation in education tended to promote the formation of sexual selves in line with particular ideologies such as feminist or socialist. Further, encountering theoretical ideas within an educative context was described in everyday terms because of participants' immersion in full time study. Interviewees also reported how formal ideas sometimes unrelated to sexuality had an impact on the ways in which they experienced and renegotiated their sexual selves. Many of these formal ideas entailed theoretical ideas about the social, as enshrined within particular academic disciplines, and were then described specifically as they related to individuals' identities.

For some, such ideas impacted not only upon their sense of identity or who they 'are', but also upon their behaviours. For both, Davina (a 39-year-old social worker and counsellor) and Marijka (a 53-year-old programme manager in community health), this meant rejecting traditional relationship forms and socially expected ways of bodily presentation as a woman respectively. Citing feminist theory, both participants found the formal ideas they encountered at university transformatory for their sexual selves and both described this process as occurring quickly.

Davina had open relationships while in her twenties as a means to explore differing ways to become more satisfied with her sexual encounters with men. Davina had been unhappy with the way she had related to men prior to being in non-monogamous relationships, and reported

feeling that this new way of relating could open up possibilities for reconceptualizing her "understanding of [her] sexuality". The prompt towards experimenting with new forms of relating came from:

… being at uni, um one, I had a child and was at uni, I was doing philosophy degree and I ended up studying a lot of feminist theory and realizing that I actually wasn't happy with the, kind of, way that I was understanding my sexuality and the way that I was interacting with men around my sexuality .

Davina, 39-year-old social worker and counsellor

Similarly, Marijka reported finding feminist scholarship liberating for not only her thinking about gender, but also for the way she had represented herself, physically, to date. Marijka's engagement with feminism altered the way she 'made' herself both figuratively and literally, since it gave her permission to alter her physical appearance:

And so finally finding feminism and saying, having the guts to say, so what I did was cut my hair I, like really extreme I think, just to make a point. I cut my hair, I think my partner at the time cut my hair and I had a tail and it was like oh my god, do you have to, because at the time I had curly locks, I had curly locks and, you know, beautiful clothes, you know, the dress and, you know, the feminine as opposed to the female […] And then grew my hair, my legs, didn't shave any more. And so, all those outward signs because I could see now, it doesn't really matter, I can do what I like.

Marijka, 53-year-old programme manager in community health

For others, the formal nature of the educational setting was recognized as impacting upon not only intimate relationships but other selves besides the sexual. Genevieve, a 33-year-old social worker in a long-term heterosexual relationship, told me that her interaction with education "…would spark with those formal, those formal structures and just branch out into all these other sectors and areas which, you know, I am so again, very blessed to be a part of, yeah".

Like other narratives about participants' changing values, those focusing on education highlighted the rapidity within which their values and attitudes about sexuality shifted during a particular point in their lives. Whilst the Meadian model highlights the constitutive process of sociality, and this is central in making the sexual self, it is clear that relationships with people also distort temporality across the lifespan. Thus, rapid change in values and attitudes towards sexuality—and in turn rapid shifts in the ways in which the sexual self is made—was reported as being due to key relationships in everyday life, rather than this process being due to other, broader social factors such as rapid technological change (see Lash 2001). This highlights the importance of understanding the interactions that occur in everyday life as constitutive.

David, a 50-year-old social planner, also talked about his personal sense of ideology during the interview and this was a philosophy which he saw as cutting across other aspects of himself through the varied roles he played in everyday life. Towards the beginning of the interview, for example, I asked him if he would describe his sexuality. By way of explaining how his personal ideology came about, he described a period of rapid change in his personal politics. The interactions that occurred through being at university in the late 1970s brought

about a radical shift in the way he thought about both the world around him as well as issues that were relevant to his day to day relationships. He said:

[…] in that context again perceptions and self sense of my sexuality and things, I suppose the main issues there were the things that derived more from, I suppose, intellectual and / or ideological issues about issues such as monogamy and the basis for relationships and all those sorts of things. And that's, I suppose, coming from having been, having gone to uni in the late '70s into the early '80s initially just, I suppose a developing sense based upon broadly socialist themes type philosophies about the way in which people and social systems work.

David, 50-year-old social planner

4   Employment and the Sexual Self

Interpersonal relations include communication between strangers, for example words and gestures may be exchanged between two people in order to successfully negotiate a crowded footpath. Verbal and physical interactions also occur between lovers. Whilst these might be characterised as interpersonal exchanges, they are both examples of social interactions whose importance in relation to one's broader biography is determined by each individual. The following accounts provide a narrative of the ways in which experiences at work help shape and constitute the sexual self.

Henry is a 45-year-old married company director who told me that "if sexuality was a fabric… [he] would be grey flannel". Yet throughout our interview, Henry made a great number of references to sexuality and gender differences. According to Henry, men do not speak to other men about sexuality as much as to other women. Broadly speaking, his account drew upon stereotypical gendered assumptions at some times while at other times he reported his reflection on his sexual self in clear relationship with his age and his activities at that given point in his biography. For example, Henry reported feeling that sexual activity was his motivator at age 17 but that at his present age he had a better appreciation of the "quality" of sexual encounters with his wife. He told me:

So in a teenager and in your twenties it's soft drink and in your thirties and forties it's a wine and, or a just straight whisky, you know, you just wet your tongue on it and it's so much nicer.

Henry, 45-year-old company manager

Although Henry's narrative appears to fit with medical accounts that differentiate sexual desire and behaviour based on so called biologically driven sex differences (see, for example, Zilbergeld 1999) as opposed to social accounts of gender, throughout his account he emphasized the importance of interactions with others within a work setting. These were positioned as having helped him to better understand his sexual self as well as providing opportunities for new ways of conceptualizing the sexual self. Conversations with colleagues and clients were specifically named as transformative:

I am a little bit uncommon, I think, in that almost for a living I discuss sexuality. So it isn't, well now that I don't work in operations it almost never happens. But in my late teens, my twenties and certainly my thirties, sexuality was a topic of discussion almost daily, either

with staff or with clients…so it's forever at the front of my mind and, like many people find it, a subject that you never quite end. You know, that conversation can go on forever…

Henry, 45-year-old company manager

Henry's account was not uncommon amongst participants. Given the large role that work plays in participants' everyday existences in late modern life, it is perhaps not surprising that narratives about work featured heavily in people's accounts of their sexual selves. Erin, a 32-year-old graphic designer, told me about the struggles she has with unifying all of her 'roles' in life. In this way, she positioned work as being a welcome escape from the pressures of raising young children. Work, for Erin, enabled her to think about other things besides the welfare of her children. Thus, professional life gave her an alternative way to interact. Working as a graphic designer from home was described as enabling her to engage with creative work as opposed to the caring work she undertook through parenting. Erin described the difficulties in transitioning between these roles, or ways of relating, in the following account:

But, yeah, so it's hard to take the mother away… Yeah, so that's one area where I have had, I find it difficult to, yeah, there is probably no situation where I am not thinking of the children. But sometimes when I am doing my work I can divorce myself a bit.
Erin, 32-year-old graphic designer

Whilst our public identities and private identities are often seen as separate, as evidenced in popular cultural references to work/life balance, for example (see White *et al.* 2003), in reality they are merely differing sites of social interaction. The increased presence of formerly taboo sexual behaviours in social life (Mulholland 2011) or "transgressive practices" (Jackson & Scott 2010a, p. 163) in all aspects of late modern social life may help to explain why participants reported overt discussions about sex within the workplace unproblematically.

The interaction between differing spheres of social life is not only of interest to scholars such as Mead. The work of Christopher Bollas (1995, p. 6), for example, seeks to theorise the "ordinary flow of unconsciousness in everyday life, especially that of what we call dissemination, when we creatively fragment along the lines of thought inspired by an intense experience". Whilst Bollas' work falls into the decidedly non-interactionist category of psychoanalytic theory, his calls for a radical reimagining of Freud's unconscious signifies a shift in the way selfhood is perceived in theorizing about late modern social life. Bollas' reimagining entails an understanding of the 'dissemination' or coming together of everyday experiences through the dream state (Bollas 1995).

Other studies focus on the impact of the blending of economy and culture on the professional self (see du Gay 1993, 1996), or the blurring between 'work' and 'life' roles (see Reed *et al.* 2005; White *et al.* 2003). Such scholarship helps an understanding of the complex ways that interaction occurs in late modern social life, while participant accounts in this study provide specific examples of the significant events in working life that help make and remake the sexual self.

Scholarly examinations of the increasingly complex social world in late modernity and the subsequent tensions between traditional roles can be seen mostly within, but not limited to, sociology in which culture is analysed (see, for example, du Gay 1993; Rojek 1993; Tiryakian 1985). These examinations range from the "… observable de-differentiation between the

religious and consumption of popular culture" (Neumann 2006, p. 81) to investigations into leisure and an interest in better understanding "… how the formation of modern individual identities, times and spaces is incompatible with freedom, choice, self determination and spontaneity" (Rojek 1993, p. 15). Thus, scholarship that seeks to understand the 'slippage' (Geertz 1973 [1966]) or 'folding in' (du Gay 1993) of tradition is clearly relevant when considering the sexual self in the so called 'liquid' (Bauman 2000) or 'plastic' (Giddens 1992) conditions that feature in late modern social life. Giddens' account of what constitutes tradition is an oversimplification (Alexander 1995, p. 4). However, the presence of employment within participant narratives and the depiction of work as a site for sexual self-making highlights the importance of interactions between people in somewhat 'traditional' settings. British sociologist, Paul du Gay, for example, examines the blurring of economy and culture, and investigates the retail sphere in particular. Notwithstanding the linguistic need for definitional categories, du Gay (1993, p. 583) argues that there has been a decreased need for divisional categories of public and private life. He concludes that:

… [i]n contemporary British retailing there is no longer any room for the base/ superstructure dichotomy. As the 'economic' folds seamlessly into the 'cultural', distinctions between 'production', 'consumption' and 'everyday life' become less clear cut.

What is important to recognise in participant accounts of work is that we can see the "self as the moving centre" (du Gay 1996, p. 30), with work only being significant if it interacts meaningfully within one's broader biography. For example, the following dialogue with Charlie illustrates the way in which work experiences can help individuals to reconstitute their sexual self. Charlie is a 49-year-old earthmoving contractor who has been married to a woman for 26 years. Unlike Henry's frank discussions with colleagues and clients about sexuality, Charlie reported work as being a space where non-sexual incidents could become significant for sexual self-making.

Charlie describes how his experiences as a farmer, noticing the behaviours of rams that would, he says, move away from sexually disinterested ewes, helped him make sense of the interactions between him and his wife. Charlie used this experience to reflexively alter his behaviour to cope with the rejection of his sexual advances in his relationship with his wife. Thus, Charlie's behaviour draws from his work knowledge and sees him removing himself from the company of his wife on the occasions where his sexual advances have been turned down.

Charlie:

I used to be a farmer, that's my first job… rams…aren't going to hang around if the ewes aren't interested in them. To have all these women and none of them want anything to do with them well it's far better that they just go off and get away rather than just sort of hang around all the time. So I take great comfort from that sort of little episode sort of…

Author/researcher:

It's interesting, yeah, yeah.

Charlie:

So, if I am not getting any attention at home, the best thing is to remove myself from the situation and I won't feel so bad about it I think.

Interaction can be argued as needing to occur between humans for an event to constitute sociality, however "[a]ll living organisms are bound up in a general social environment or situation, in a complex of social interrelations and interactions upon which their continued existence depends" (Mead 1934, p. 228). Charlie's comparison between the rams and himself demonstrates that he recognises the connection between all social creatures. His experience gained through work is described as significant because it was an event he described as helping him to negotiate his interactions with his wife (whom he depicted as having little interest in engaging in sexual or intimate behaviour with him).

The work environment also highlighted the disjuncture between acceptable standards of professional dress. Ruth, a 39-year-old executive director recalled being told by a colleague that she should not wear knee-length leather boots in the workplace because the boots were 'fuck-off boots' with a sexual connotation. Here is Ruth's description of this event:

Yeah, because I think there are a lot of pitfalls for women um in business … like the boots that I've got on today. I remember, I've had these boots for about six years. The first time I ever wore them I remember someone saying to me, "Oh you can't wear those in this environment". "Why not?" "Well they're fuck off boots, aren't they? You know", and I'm like, "No, they're my boots and I like them and I'm going to wear them". You know, there is no flesh showing, but yes, they are leather boots that come all the way up to my knees. And I like them!

Ruth, 39-years-old executive director

As Mead (1934) argues, the relationships between biography and cultural settings affect social interactions and the meaning of the social interaction also affects self-making. Ruth's colleague's comments may have held a different meaning were they articulated by her lover or boss. The nuances between individuals, manifest in their communicative and gestural interactions, are complex in late modern life. The paradoxes evident in contemporary life make understanding the sexual self a somewhat complex task. Ruth's executive position as a woman in a male environment, on the surface, is a socially sanctioned reality. Wearing 'fuck off boots', however, is frowned upon and policed by colleagues. The 'transformative' nature of late modern life is made more complex by the continued existence of inequality and social injustice. In reality, continued injustices pervade much of the social world at the same time as liberatory discourses about sex (see Jackson 2007, p. 12).

Another study participant, Claire, links professional life to sexual self-making in terms of productivity at work. Claire is a 48-year-old working in the area of child protection. Claire described herself as being "comfortable" in neither being in a relationship nor having children despite being raised to expect this through her "traditional upbringing". She described her situation as feeling "quite powerful". In our interview, we discussed how her relationship status has influenced her working life over the years. Claire provided a very practical insight into the 'costs' of being in relationships and raising children in relation to one's productivity. She said:

Only, you know relationships influence your working life because if they are going well or going badly, you know, that always has an influence. So probably the most productive times

in working life have been when I have been single and quite comfortable with …[laughs] Yeah, you can spend as long as you like in the office. Claire, 48-year-old working in child protection

Claire's account says something about the broader environment within which women are in paid employment. She makes the point that it is beneficial to productivity to be a single woman, yet her "traditional upbringing" meant that she "always expected" that she would marry and have children. Her account, like others, highlights the complex landscape of work and sexual self-making in late modern social life. Cross-cultural variations, culture and broader social structures form a symbiotic alliance with one another (du Gay 1997, 2002, p. 498).

Yet how do individuals fare in this complex landscape? Data from this study suggest that individuals' biographies determine the significance of these social interactions to sexual self-making. For example, Edward is a 57-year-old working in education. Edward, from the beginning of our interview, emphasised how important his social interactions had been in producing 'learning' about his sexual self. At the beginning of our interview, he told me: "I think I have learnt my sexuality socially, culturally". Edward also spoke about the "maturation process" that he feels he has gone through—this is a process of learning and changing both how he saw himself as well as how he felt he came across to others. Edward cited some frustration about what Gagnon and Simon (1973 [2011]) would say are limited 'scripts' in relation to sexual behaviours. Edward's account of this was framed in gendered terms, for example he told me that he "gets really upset" about the coding of intercourse as "penetration" because it frames women "as the receiver". Despite his current awareness of gendered inequalities, he told me that he had changed his values because of the nature of the other professionals with whom he has worked during his career. Therefore, whilst Edward's experience of his sexual self is acknowledged as being embedded in social and cultural norms and 'scripts', various interactions with colleagues throughout his career have helped him make choices about his sexual self. The influence of others on his sexual self-making can be seen in the following account:

So, that was, that particular period of time was spent all day with males. And there was, yeah, I mean, a complete sort of, what's the word I want? Sexual references and sexual connotations were made continuously. And not only about women but about other men as well. And so that was always prominent in my thoughts. That was always how I thought of myself, first as a male and as a male the male part was driving the sexual part. […] And that's been an interesting adjustment for me to have that as like a moulding background and then move into different sorts of work where I worked as equals with women and my thoughts had to change considerably about that, you know. […] And in that process, yeah, I felt that I was actually shaving off some of my sexuality, some of my learned sexuality. Yeah. And yeah, I think for some time there I wasn't sure how to behave. How to be.

Edward, 57-year-old worker in education

One of the benefits of examining everyday life is that it provides us with the opportunity to better understand inequalities (Jackson & Scott 2010a, p. 162). Participants' accounts provided clear examples of the ways in which specific biographical events were shaped through individual sense-making of broader social interactions. However, it was also clear that such agential processes were confined to the choosing of particular, clearly defined 'scripts'. This is reinforced here by Edward, who noted that the fixed meanings associated

with intercourse were a source of frustration for him. Further, when Edward described his ongoing self-making and the subsequent changes work interactions produced, he felt de-stabilised to the point where he reported wondering "how to be". Edward's question of "how to be" resonates with Giddens' (1991, p. 70) claim that late modernity prompts us to constantly ask ourselves, "What to do? How to act? Who to be?" Yet Edward is concerned with the *how* of being, which denotes a problem with the performative aspect of identity. His question relates to changing how he assimilates new knowledge gained through work interactions into his biography. Edward's account provides a clear example of the complexities involved in the assimilation of new knowledge.

As we have seen through examining the data from this study into everyday sexuality, how we make sense of the role that significant others play alongside the broader social experiences such as education in constituting sexuality involves understanding how these interactions intersect with personal biography. We now move on to critically analyze the broader significance of this study in relation to social work practice and social policies in which the sexual self is considered.

5   Social Work and the Sexual Self: Practice and Policy

Specialist sexual health work is best carried out utilising the social model of health. Social work, as a discipline in which sociological and psychological theories are central, has much to offer sexual health work. Social workers can be seen providing sexual health services in countries such as Australia, Canada and the US. In Britain however, roles such as those within GUM clinics and teenage pregnancy prevention programmes are often populated by those with medical backgrounds such as in nursing and psychology. Yet social work is ideally placed to undertake this work: social models of health align neatly with the profession's value base, theory base and understanding of broader social issues which affect individuals' day to day lives (Dunk 2007). Sexual dysfunction is—perhaps counter intuitively for most—best theorised through social models as opposed to a unitary medical framework.

For phenomena which have historically defined through medicalised discourses, there has been a recent shift towards social research which examines the broader issues which produce illness. For example, recent research into anorexia (Costa-Font & Jofre-Bonet 2011) found that "anorexia is socially induced" and researchers note that "these findings have serious policy implications. They call for urgent action on individual identity… so as to prevent severe damage to women's health" (pp. 19-20). Similarly, sexuality—and the related 'problems' associated with it—have been overwhelmingly associated with interventions in which a medical discourse is central. Social workers in a range of practice settings ought to see sexuality as a day-to-day phenomenon: since social workers work with people, knowledge about human sexuality is vital (Dunk 2007).

Yet there has been some encouragement that social and medical discourses can come together to promote well-being. A range of professionals with medical and social specialisms recently united in their resistance to 'pink Viagra'. This rejection of the pharmacologicalisation of women's experiences (Hartley 2006) of loss of libido has signalled a shift towards a desire to better understand the ways in which interactions through intimacy, biology, biographical events and everyday life come together to influence the sexual self.

Like the social model of anorexia, social models of sexuality require a broader policy focus if the public health concerns arising from sexual behaviours are to be addressed in any comprehensive way. As we have seen in the participant narratives from this study, their

sexual selves were influenced through non-sexualised encounters. These have been theorised through Mead's scholarly work on the self (Mead 1934, Gagnon & Simon 1973 [2011], Jackson & Scott 2010a). Yet what role does social work play in the sexual self? Social work across children and families and adults work (Dunk 2007, Dunk-West 2010), including mental health (Carr 2010), substance misuse (Hafford-Letchfield 2008, Nelson & Hafford-Letchfield 2008) are examples of generalised social work fields in which opportunities to promote positive sexualities, reducing sexual violence and other forms of inequality, as well as promoting choice relating to reproduction proliferate. Yet these opportunities to practice in a preventative manner are rarely part of current social work practice (Dunk-West & Hafford-Letchfield 2010). Social work must move away from compartmentalising the self (Dunk-West 2011) and instead move towards an interactionist notion of self-formation.

Despite decades of scholarly work about the social construction of teenage pregnancy for example (Murcott 1980), policy responses also continue to recruit medicalised interventions in which targeted sexual and relationships education (SRE) is unfairly positioned as a panacea to various counter narratives about sexuality (see Brown & Dunk-West 2011). Teenage pregnancy has been in the public consciousness since "The Conservative government in the 1990s raised the threat of social decline through the politicisation of the singe mother, with an aggressive rhetoric against falling moral standards" (Macvarish 2010). Teenage sexuality continues to be understood as one aspect of behaviour rather than as influenced by all aspects of everyday life.

It is in understanding the unintended consequences of constitutive social interactions (Mead 1934) that social work is ideally placed to better integrate this knowledge into practice. In late modernity the complex sociocultural context in which gender and the sexual self are lived out (Leaker & Dunk-West 2011) requires further attention in social work theorising. Here scholarly work on community has much to offer in building a theory of the role of social work in building positive sexual selves.

Medicalised discourses of the self—and of sexuality—are limiting, not least because of their propensity towards pathology but this is primarily due to the dearth of attention given to the importance of sociality. Recent theorising in sociology offers new ways in which contemporary life may be better understood by policy-makers. Late modern social conditions have brought about shifts in the ways in which people interact in public space and activities that bring diverse people together is often overlooked by institutions (Sennett 2012). The work of Richard Sennett is concerned with the ways in which social interaction occurs within public settings. Paradoxically, he is reluctant to engage in what he terms "policy wonkery" (2012, p. 31), yet much could be gained through the application of his work in which self-constitution is theorised into social policies relating to sexuality.

Participants in this study cited both employment and education as key drivers for shaping and 'transforming' (Giddens 1992) their sexual selves. Ultimately Sennett rejects the ways in which contemporary structures in the workplace disengage actors from one another through stratification and competition and stifles creativity (see Sennett 2006). Yet participants in this study saw both education and employment as providing 'space' whereby newer, more liberatory discourses of the sexual self could be accessed. The differentiation between a private self and professional or work life was not made (Dunk-West 2011) but rather, all interactions in a variety of capacities were called upon to provide evidence of poignant biographical moments which shifted previous ways of thinking: it was social interaction that was the key to this (Mead 1934). Here Sennett's (2012) recent work on "cooperation as craft"

is helpful. Participants in this study were drawn to interact with a diverse range of people and knowledge bases—along with their respectively unique and divergent views and experiences. Despite these differences, the requirement to co-exist through interaction in a particular frame (be it educational or related to their employment) produced "cooperative" (Sennett 2012) interactions which ultimately positively affected participants' sexual selves. This dynamic required the coming together of biographical events and new experiences of social interaction and in this way were constitutive of the (sexual) self (Mead 1934; Jackson & Scott 2010a). These shifts in self formation were not described as being due to the deliberate inward reflexivity suggested of late modernity (see Giddens 1992) but were reflected upon in the interview context as examples of new knowledge acquired and constituted by participants about both their own sexual selves as well as their sexual world views.

Although it can be argued that social space has become less conducive to social interaction amongst diverse peoples (Sennett 1977), sexual sociality has become one the unintended consequences of late modern social life and this is not widely understood by policy-makers considering human sexuality. What is required is a comprehensive understanding of the self—and the ways in which it is constituted (Mead 1934) in late modern social life and across the lifespan, so that a broader picture of the needs of people may be understood—and responded to by policy makers and practitioners. As we have seen in participant accounts described above, both employment and education helped promote positive change in the ways in which they lived out their sexual lives. Policy-makers attempting to address social inequalities in relation to sexuality have relied solely upon targeted, time-limited educational programmes rather than working towards a more general incentive to increase social participation. Interactionist understandings of the sexual self provide a counter narrative to the medicalised, compartmentalised self and policy responses therefore need to embrace the complex and interlacing ways in which social interaction produces the self. There is much work to be done in social policy-making in order to anticipate the ways in which the current economic climate, cuts to public spending, increasing levels of unemployment and university fee increases all have profound influences on the ways in which individuals, families and communities live out everyday life in late modern times. The symbiotic, ongoing and biographically varied social interactions in everyday life are central to not only reaching such an understanding, but are vital to embrace if social policies about sexuality can successfully move beyond medicalised and compartmentalised notions of selfhood.

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