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Sexual Identity -Gender Identity - Musings.

A few months ago, I was having a therapeutic conversation with a client and we started to discuss sexuality. He is recovering from sexual addiction, and aware of some discomfort with experiencing a range of emotion, particularly what he refers to as "bad" emotion (sadness, anger, frustration). He has been in the habit of using a variety of strategies to avoid his feelings – particularly the ones he has viewed as "bad": he intellectualizes, he problem-solves, he focuses on thoughts to avoid noticing the sensation of emotion in his body. He had also been relying on sexual fantasy and viewing porn online to distract him from discomfort. While we tend to imagine how sexuality makes us more aware of our body and often our emotions, for sex addicts, sexual acting out often disconnects them from their emotions and from their bodies. As we were discussing his difficulties with sexual acting out I became increasingly aware of all these strategies he was using for disconnecting, and it made me wonder about his sexuality.

Sexual Identity – "Oh, I'm not gay."

"I'd like to have a conversation about your sexual Identity", I said.

His response was: "Oh, I'm not attracted to men".

He was not the first person to respond to me that way when I asked about sexual identity. I was not asking if he was gay: I knew he was in a heterosexual relationship, and I was pretty sure that his sexual attraction was only to women. (Although I should add: when I am discussing sexuality with any client I make no assumptions about to whom they are drawn sexually and romantically, and I typically ask, "are you attracted to men, women or both".) What I wanted to discuss with him was not his sexual orientation – whether he was gay, straight, bisexual or some variation of those labels – but rather how he experienced himself as a sexual person, his identity as a sexual man.

What defines sexual identity?

Attractions would be one factor. Are you attracted to males, females or both? In your attraction to someone, how influenced are you by physical attraction? How drawn are you to someone's particular psychological issues or interpersonal skills? To dominance? Or compliance? Finances?

Do you tend to initiate sexual contact? Do you wait for others to initiate?

What kinds of sex do you like? What kinds of sex do you participate in? What is sex anyway? I routinely clarify with clients what they are talking about when we talk about sex. I have found that for many of my clients sexual touching while nude, or oral sex would not be called



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sex. Sex is the word they use only to refer to intercourse (as a recent U.S. president who infamously "did not have sexual relations with that woman" would have said.) My language is different – sex, or being sexual, includes for me a range of sexual activities and is not limited to intercourse. Do you enjoy receiving oral sex? Giving? How important is kissing in your sexual repertoire?

Do you feel comfortable with masturbation (or as we sex therapists like to say, 'self-pleasure')? Do you view it as a sexual activity that is satisfying and enjoyable in and of itself, so it has become part of your 'sexual repertoire'? Or do you view it as only something you do because a partner is not available? Do you – or does your partner – view masturbation as a form of 'cheating' on the relationship, or as interfering in some way with your sexual relationship as a couple? Or do you encourage your partner to enjoy self-pleasure simply because it is enjoyable and a different activity than he or she would have if you were in the room?

How do you experience sexual contact in your body? Do you feel sensation throughout your body? Or is sex focused on your genitals? Are you focused on enjoying sensations during the experience, or are you more focused on building to the point of being able to orgasm? Are you sensitive to "sexual energies" in your body (as practitioners of tantra are)? How do you feel about sex that does not lead to orgasm? Or sex that does not lead to orgasm for your partner?

Offered the choice, would you rather have brief sex twice? Or would you rather have more involved and more intimate sex that took longer, but only once?

Why even consider this idea of sexual identity?

Reflecting about your sexual preferences, your sense of sex in your body and in your mind, and your sense of engagement with your sexual partner(s) can help you to connect with your experience of sex, which in turn can enhance that experience. By being mindfully present in your body, in the sexual experience, you can have an improved sense of sexual pleasure.

Having a conversation with your sexual partner(s) or a sex therapist can help you to clarify your sexual identity and lead to a more fulfilling sexual life.

The client I mentioned, has been very thoughtful about his sexual identity. He has referenced that conversation in our meetings (and has given permission for me to share the story I've written here). He is much more aware of trying to evaluate his emotional responses. He is thoughtful about his sexual preferences, and his partner's. For him, like most of us, it is an ongoing journey.