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Borderlands: My Path to Becoming a Sex Therapist

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Abstract

Current studies focus on the practice of therapy more than the person of the therapist, which remains true in the practice of sex therapy. This study seeks to provide insight into the person-of-the-therapist by exploring the researcher's personal journey to becoming a sex therapist. Using an autoethnography qualitative research approach, the researcher analyzed his inner experiences. The researcher demonstrated his life in the borderlands, how Eros reconciles his double-consciousness, and how this has led him to his work as a sex therapist. This study encourages readers to reflect and give voice to their own developmental experiences, adding to the collective wisdom, particularly those considering the career of sex therapy

Keywords

Autoethnography, Person-of-the-Therapist, Sex Therapy, Eros, Differentiation

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Borderlands: My Path to Becoming a Sex Therapist

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Current studies focus on the practice of therapy more than the person of the therapist, which remains true in the practice of sex therapy. This study seeks to provide insight into the person-of-the-therapist by exploring the researcher's personal journey to becoming a sex therapist. Using an autoethnography qualitative research approach, the researcher analyzed his inner experiences. The researcher demonstrated his life in the borderlands, how Eros reconciles his double-consciousness, and how this has led him to his work as a sex therapist. This study encourages readers to reflect and give voice to their own developmental experiences, adding to the collective wisdom, particularly those considering the career of sex therapy. Keywords: Autoethnography, Person-of-the-Therapist, Sex Therapy, Eros, Differentiation

Career choice is influenced by several variables. This holds true for those who work as clinicians in the mental and behavioral health (MBH) profession as well. While therapists are often tasked with guiding others toward career fulfillment, less is known about the dynamics that influence their own intrapersonal career choices and development. It seems even less is known about specialist within the MBH profession, for example, those who specialize in the practice of sex therapy.

Sex therapists often devote their careers to unveiling the mysteries of human sexuality. However, who is the person-of-the-sex-therapist? What is their "back story"? This study seeks to answer these questions, providing insight to guide career counselors and potential sex therapists as they discern career choices.

Literature Review

Most of the literature focuses on what sex therapists *do*, not on who they *are*. One can quickly learn the different problems a sex therapist is trained to treat, from desire and arousal issues to issues of addiction and identity (Levine, Risen, & Althor, 2010). Occasionally, personal aspects from authors are included, as with Levine et al. (2010); however, the focus still remains on the practice of therapy more than the person of the therapist.

The limited attention to the latter may stem from a fear of narcissism and a devaluation of the inner, private side of life's experiences within the Western culture, (Morin, 1988; Red Hawk, 2009). It seems more value is placed on the awareness of the outer world than cultivating a deep, meaningful gaze inward. Introversion is still finding its place of honor in Western society (Cain, 2013). This study seeks to bridge that gap by providing an inward glance of a sex therapist.

Methods

An autoethnography is a qualitative research approach that allows a researcher to systematically analyze (graphy) personal experiences (auto) in an effort to understand cultural experiences (ethno; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). It allows the researcher to attend to and interpret his or her experiences in a meaningful way. The researcher and the participant are

one. This approach has been chosen to provide a richer and deeper understanding of the person-of-the-sex-therapist.

To collect data, a first-person account of the researcher's journey to becoming a sex therapist was documented. More than a mere narrative, the researcher was charged with analyzing his experiences and attempting to connect this insight with a larger cultural relevance. The results that follow are his reflection and analysis.

Results

Both as a clinician and a researcher, it is good for me to explore my motivations. My professional roles often have me attending to and interpreting the experiences of others. While necessary, this approach alone is not sufficient in our quest for understanding. What is lacking is the researcher's own experiences. Researcher, know thyself!

People have often asked me how I became a sex therapist. I have typically given them some passing comment about how my childhood curiosity of sexuality developed into an academic and eventually a professional pursuit. While this satisfied most of my questioners, I found it was no longer a satisfying answer for me. I started to truly wonder what was stirred in me to attract me to such a profession. There were no external societal or familial encouragements, as one might experience in becoming a doctor, lawyer, athlete, or entertainer. And without minimizing the sexual wounds I have experienced, my attraction to the profession was also not directly related to attempts to recover from a particular wounding or deficiency in my own story. My adult sexual development has not been significantly impaired by sexual trauma, abuse, addictions, or dysfunctions.

What I am discovering is that it is mystical unions that attract me. This is a union in which two can become one while retaining their individuality, a unity that honors distinctions. The sexual union provides a vivid and concrete picture of this type of union.

As I become more aware of my own internal unity, I am drawn to the unity displayed in others and in the world. This is a desire from fullness, not from lack (Moore, 1985). As such, my initial attraction to exploring sexuality is a fascination with the symbolism revealed in the sexual union, an example of the mystical union experienced also within myself. This internal unity I discovered by living in the borderlands.

A borderland is the space between two boundaries. I first became aware of my existence between two boundaries when I realized I was not completely at home in the Black American or the White American community. But this was no melting pot. It is similar to what W.E.B. Du Bois (2003) termed a double-consciousness. This is a state in which I am ever aware of my internal twoness. With Du Bois (2003), I sensed two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, and two warring ideals in one body. With a double-consciousness I live in the borderland between the minority culture of Black Americans and the majority culture of Whites Americans. I am neither completely in the Black community or the White community; I am in the borderland between the two.

A college roommate once called me an Oreo (i.e., Black on the outside and White on the inside). As I was not the stereotypical Black college male, I understand how he would make this conclusion. However, it remains a false description. My core values are no more "White" than they are "Black." In me they are one, yet I can still appreciate the distinct values each culture brings me. This allows me to be comfortable in both worlds. I don't have to choose one and "sell out" to the other. I get to be both, though few understand this. The assumption is that I must choose one or the other, that it is unrealistic, if not impossible, to live in both worlds. I disagree.

Recently, I became aware that I lived in the borderlands in other spheres of my life. For example, I have never been married, and I am a marriage therapist. Professionally I live in

the world of marriages, while personally I live in the world of singles. Additionally, I am a celibate sex therapist. Professionally I live in a world of interpersonal sexual intimacies, while personally I live in a world of celibacy. In my professional world I am often tempted to keep my singleness and celibacy in the shadows; I imagine these are not strong selling points for most potential clients. In my personal world there is also much of my professional world that is in the shadows. I have found that not many singles regularly and deeply ponder the mysteries of marriage, nor celibates the mysteries of sex. There is little space to talk shop in my personal world.

My life stage and faith tradition are other areas where I walk in the borderlands. In my early thirties I am a young adult with an “old spirit.” Externally I am still striving to establish my professional and social identities, while internally my spirit rests with the sages of life. For undergrad I went to a private college with a different faith tradition than my own. The tenets of faith I grew up with were not the same tenets I was then exposed to. In classes and with roommates it was a struggle to live authentically with both, to be open to the new without denying the old. Somehow in all these spheres, and more I'm sure to discover, I had to learn how to hold two seemingly contradictory worlds in one.

While I can be fairly comfortable in two worlds, there is a sense in which I also remain an outsider or a nomad traveling between the two, with no place to truly call home. The borderlands is a remote place; only a few seem to be aware of its location. Those who pass by are often warm and welcoming as they invite me into their world. This is very tempting. I long to be accepted and to have some place familiar to connect with others. However, these invitations typically require that I give up one world for the other; they require that I give up a true part of who I am in this season of life, and I am not okay with that.

Living in the tension of two worlds is not an easy place to reside. This is frontier living with many challenges and unknowns. It is a place where my sense of Self is constantly tested and refined. At the same time, I see this as a privileged position. Not everyone has the ability to live well in two separate worlds. It can be lonesome, but, paradoxically, it is through this loneliness that I gained my sense a connection to all the world.

Because my “world” is not limited to those who are just like me, I am developing a greater openness to others. As I am learning to unify the diversity within me, I am better able to sit in this tension with others. In the borderlands I am discovering a nondualistic view of the world, which is both simple and complex at the same time. (Certainly, life is more complex than the simple black/white dichotomies we try to force it into. Yet, there remains a simple underlying connectedness to everything). From my time and development in the borderlands I am able to guide others toward unity. In this way, I help to facilitate the presence of Eros in their lives.

Our modern understanding of Eros often restricts this life force to romantic coupling relationships, if not strictly to genital behaviors. However, a classical understanding sees Eros as a life force that drives us toward union with self, others, the world, and the Ultimate Reality – God (Irwin, 1991). This includes sexual unions, but also goes beyond this as it seeks to reunite us with the ultimate truth, goodness, and beauty of life. Eros is present whenever two become one and there is an authentic intercourse, a true connection and union of beings. It is Eros that energizes the union of lovers and the union of friends, the union of cultures and societies, and even the union between humanity and the divine (Irwin, 1991).

It is Eros that stimulates the healing of my double-consciousness, reconciling my two souls, my two thoughts, my two strivings, and my two warring ideals into one. Experiencing this reconciling force of Eros internally, I am more attracted to external displays of Eros, the sexual union being a profound and symbolic example of this force.

In sexual intercourse individuals can transcend the boundaries of their gender while still remaining in the fullness of their maleness or femaleness respectively. Eros allows the “male

world” to be reconciled with the “female world,” mysteriously joining two distinct essences into one, without loss of either. It is the fascination with this mystery that initially drew me into the study of sexuality. And it is this symbolism of sexual union that serves as a guide through the borderlands, exhibiting in a very physical and concrete manner the possibility of two diverse worlds joining into one.

As a guide toward reconciliation, Eros has gained an honored place in my life. My sensitivity to interactions that lack this unifying presence has been heightened, which has also revealed my desire to help others experience deep union in their lives. My work as a marriage and sex therapist allows me to fulfill this desire.

On the surface, it would appear that my task as a therapist is to simply help couples have a happier marriage and better sex. In reality, these are the fruits of true marital and sexual union. Many couples share various acts together, but are far from unified, leaving them vulnerable to marital and sexual frustrations. As I am tempted to do internally, many spouses are also tempted to deny or reject their differing worlds in their relationship. This is the easy path, but not the path toward oneness.

I see myself as a messenger and facilitator of Eros for my clients, helping them to discover, remember, and cultivate true marital and sexual union with each other. At the same time, while my professional identity is that of a sex therapist, who I am and what I do is much larger than this title can contain. Living in the borderlands has prepared me to be a minister of Eros toward the world, having a desire to help us all reunite with the true, the good, and the beautiful in each other and in all of life. We are all connected, so as I serve one I am also serving the world.

I have long felt out of place and homeless in the borderlands. In many ways, life here has felt like a perpetual adolescence, that awkward waiting period in between two worlds. I now see how this life has prepared me to receive Eros, and bring its gifts to others. In this, there is a growing peace.

Discussion

This study sought to explore and analyze the person-of-the-sex-therapist by using the qualitative research approach of autoethnography. This approach allowed readers to hear the “back story” of a sex therapist. The researcher shared what it is like to live in the borderlands, to allow Eros to bring its reconciling power to his double-consciousness, and how this has led to his work as a sex therapist.

This study into the person-of-the-sex-therapist can assist clinicians in observing their own Self. With an improved understanding of themselves, they will be better equipped to serve clients and the world around them. This dialogue can aid the advance of research and clinical practice. Additionally, this discussion benefits those considering a career in sex therapy, allowing them to see beyond simply what a therapist does and into the person-of-the-therapist.

To be sure, this is but one experience, and others are certain to have similar and differing experiences. However, sharing this experience opens the door for others to contribute to the conversation, and for the conversation to continue.

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