

- Vol. 3, No. 1 • 2026 • (pp. 167–183) •
www.tidsskrift.dk/irtp

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.7146/irtp.v3i1.167383>

Subjectivity, Intersubjectivity and Temporality in Meaning-Making of Sexual Desire

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Abstract

In the history of philosophy and psychology, the relationship between subjectivity and sexual desire has been explored from various perspectives. However, the processes of meaning-making related to sexual desire remain partially unknown, despite being central to contemporary debates. This study aims to provide a detailed and evidence-based discourse on the psychic dimensions of sexual desire. The study begins with a historical and theoretical review of differing perspectives on sexual desire. It then focuses more specifically on the problem of the relationship to the Other in naturalistic conceptions of desire. This discussion is supported by a case study. The case study is part of a broader qualitative research project based on the accounts of sexology patients consulting for issues related to sexual desire. Out of 256 interviews with 25 participants, 105 interviews from 22 participants were selected. Only excerpts concerning the meaning of sexual desire were transcribed and analyzed using a dialogical approach. Results reveal that the construction of the meaning of sexual desire involves temporality, micro-events, and relationships with Others. More specifically, the detailed analysis of the case study highlights the psychological and ethical consequences of naturalistic representations of desire, which frame desire as monological.

Keywords: dialogism, intersubjectivity, meaning-making, monological sexual desire.

Doubt thou the stars are fire,
 Doubt that the sun doth move,
 Doubt truth to be a liar,
 But never doubt I love
 (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Acte II, scène 2, 1603).

Introduction

Theoretical questions surrounding sexual desire are absolutely fundamental. Why? First, for clinical reasons. In my experience as a clinical sexologist, issues related to desire are the primary reason for consultations, directly expressed (Adams, 2014) under the term sexual desire inhibition (American Psychiatric Association, 2015). Moreover, even when not identified at the start of therapy, the theme of desire emerges quickly, even in cases that initially appear strictly functional¹. Second, this topic has rarely been the subject of theoretical and epistemological studies, despite its ties to dominant societal issues. This scarcity contrasts with the proliferation of discussions on desire throughout the history of thought and culture, at the heart of literary and artistic creativity and enduring philosophical inquiries (Halwani et al., 2022; Soble, 1996, 2008). Such abundance attests to a singular human experience, rich with infinite meanings and profound societal implications.

This research is situated within the context of sexology, a highly heterogeneous specialty dominated by sexual medicine, which proposes naturalistic or functionalist representations of desire (Castel, 2007; Chaperon, 2007; Corbin, 2008). The psychoanalytic approach, which postulates the singularity of the individual and prioritizes intrapsychic phenomena—to which I adhere—remains a minority perspective for historical and institutional reasons. Suggested by this theoretical framework and my clinical experience, I begin with the presupposition that representations of sexual desire and relationships with the Other are interdependent. Some representations reported during sexology consultations may affect desire as an intersubjective relationship. This leads to the following questions: How does the Subject's erotic universe embed itself within culture and individual trajectories? How do different perspectives on desire dialogue within a single person, particularly in the case of naturalistic or functionalist representations?

To address these questions, I will briefly survey various conceptualizations of sexual desire and examine naturalism and its ethical consequences (Section 2). Dialogism will serve as the theoretical and methodological framework (Section 3). Then, I will present a case study illustrating how different representations of desire interact within an individual's discourse. This will allow us to investigate the psychic processes at play when the desire for the Other is expressed in naturalistic terms, particularly in terms of instrumentalization (Section 4). Finally, I will demonstrate how this study leads us to consider the theory of desire as an ethical commitment (Section 5).

¹ Indicatively, from 2019 to 2023, that is, over a span of 5 years, in my own practice, 47% of new patients consulted for a request directly related to desire, and 28% for a request related to non-medical sexual dysfunction, indirectly associated with sexual desire. This represents exactly three-quarters of consultation reasons, based on a cohort of 247 individuals (statistics recorded progressively, averages calculated on 10.03.2024).

Sexual desire

Desire: Lexical and semantic variations

The terminology surrounding sexual impulse is not uniform. To demonstrate, let us compare the history and nuances of three lexemes: *Eros*, *libido*, and sexual desire. The first, rooted in Greek polytheism, carries meanings that have varied over time: sometimes as the deity of love and irresistible desire, sometimes as vulgar love or selfless love among young boys in Plato's philosophy (Plato, 385-370 BCE / 2007). In common language, *Eros*, *eroticism*, and *erotic* describe anything that evokes desire and its manifestations. Without being reductive, these terms implicitly carry the notion of an external power acting upon the Subject, owing to their polytheistic origin. Freud commented on the etymology of *Eros*, employing it in his final theory of drives to signify life drives. He clarified that while Platonic *Eros* aligns with the concept of sexuality, it cannot be reduced to mere genital function (Freud, 1920/2012).

In contrast, the lexeme *libido* originates from Latin, used by Augustine in a negative sense (Augustine, 397-401/1964, Book X) and by Spinoza to mean "sensual love, that is, sexual desire born of beauty" (Spinoza, 1677/1996, Book IV, XIX). Freud modernized the term as a central concept of his drive theory². In his first topography, outlined in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905/2006), libido is conceived as a force that is not solely physiological but also possesses a psychic, qualitative aspect. Freud distinguished self-libido or narcissistic libido from object libido (of love or desire). In his second topography (1920 onward), Freud identified two types of drives: death drives (toward destruction or aggression) and life drives (sexual or libidinal). Thus, Freudian libido is a complex notion encompassing a broad field of experiences, not exclusively sexual.

Finally, the term *desire* acquired sexual connotations in French during the Middle Ages. In Montaigne's writings, desire signifies a natural impulse that should not be restrained, particularly in women (Montaigne, 1588/1924, Book III). A century later, Spinoza associated desire with affectivity, under the Latin term *cupiditas*, as a dynamic passion and "the very essence of man" because it encompasses "all efforts of human nature signified by the terms appetite, will, desire, or impulse" (Spinoza, 1677/2014, p. 259). Other etymological traditions could complement this overview, such as the distinction between the German *Trieb* and English *lust*. The former, employed by Freud, refers to instinct or drive, while the latter carries both the moral connotation of its equivalent, *luxury*, and denotes pleasure.

² According to Laplanche and Pontalis, this term was borrowed from Albert Moll (1862–1939), a psychiatrist and sexologist (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1998, p. 224). The first occurrence of the term "libido" in Freud's work appears in Manuscript E, which dates to 1894, in a letter to Fliess titled "Wie die Angst entsteht," in these terms:

Also physisch sexuelle Spannung erweckt von gewissem Wert an psychische Libido, die dann den Koitus u. dgl. einleitet. Kann die spezifische Reaktion nicht erfolgen, so wächst die physisch-psychische Spannung (der "Sexualaffekt") ins Ungemessene, er wird störend, es ist aber noch immer kein Grund zu seiner Verwandlung. (Freud 1894/1999, p. 74)

These lexical and semantic differences revolve around the place accorded to the object of desire. This issue lies at the heart of contemporary philosophical debates between proponents of a naturalistic (biological, functionalist, organicist, or mechanistic) view of sexual desire—who argue that the object of desire fulfills nature's needs—and intentionalists, who emphasize that desire cannot exist without an object. For the latter, *I desire you* does not mean *I have a (sexual) want that you can satisfy*. Sexual desire relates to the person recognized by the Subject. Among intentionalists are phenomenologists like Sartre (1943) and neo-Kantians, particularly Scruton (2006). This overview illustrates the semantic variations and symbolic nuances—mythological or drive-related, external or internal to the Subject—embedded within the terminology.

This topic has also been revisited by Stephen A. Mitchell (1946–2000), co-founder of relational psychoanalysis alongside Jay R. Greenberg (1942). Mitchell rethought sexual desire not as an impersonal force aimed at inner relief, pleasure, or the limitation of pain. On the contrary: "Here the establishment of strong connections to others, in reality or in fantasy, is presumed to be primary" (Mitchell, 1988, p. 91), such that "for the relational-model theorist, sexuality and other bodily processes are the realm in which relational configurations are expressed or defended against" (Mitchell, 1988, p. 92). Following in the footsteps of Erich Fromm (1900–1980), Mitchell framed sexuality as an expression of historical and cultural context (Fromm, 2013; Mitchell, 1988). On this point and particularly given that the emotional dimension of these processes is primary, Zittoun identifies affinities with the cultural psychology to which I refer (Salvatore & Zittoun, 2011). It is clear, then, that these different conceptions of sexual desire immediately raise ethical questions insofar as they concern the relationship with the Other.

Problems with the naturalistic discourse on sexual desire

Naturalism, as an exclusive framework for understanding desire, raises ethical concerns. Among these, one of the most encountered issues can be formulated as follows: if a person views their desire primarily as serving the satisfaction of physiological or psychological needs, they may also perceive the Other as someone who can (or should) fulfill these needs. What status does this confer upon the Other? And, correspondingly, what status is assigned to the partner? Ultimately, is the ethical question even relevant if, as Gagnon (2004) argues—who, alongside Simon, developed the theory of sexual scripts (Simon & Gagnon, 2003)—sexuality is merely a mundane experience, an ordinary activity that takes place between dinner, television, and sleep?

Sartre addressed the ethical status of the object of desire in these terms: how can one desire the Other while still considering them as a Subject, that is, an autonomous human being, without instrumentalizing them (Sartre, 1943)? More broadly, contemporary philosophers continue to question whether sexuality conforms to Kant's categorical imperative: "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means." (Kant, 1785/2012, Ak 429). Martha Nussbaum (1995), a neo-Kantian thinker, has shown that, on the one hand, the instrumentalization inherent in sexuality is undeniably linked to the fungibility of the Other, and, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of situating the intersubjective relationship within a broader temporal perspective. Alan Soble (2022), known as the founder of the American Society for the Philosophy of Sex and Love, examines the issue of consent and argues that it does not fully address this question.

In the field of social psychology, a substantial body of research has focused on the instrumentalization of Others, particularly in the sexual realm, and, since the 1990s, has increasingly done so from a feminist perspective. Notably, Glick and Fiske (1996) introduced the concept of ambivalent sexism, which, in their view, conceals an expected form of instrumentalization.

Unsurprisingly, the question of instrumentalization—and more broadly, the status of the Subject—is also highly prevalent in clinical interviews. More specifically, our questions might be framed as follows: How do people appropriate certain conceptions of desire, and with what consequences for their own sexual desire? How do they interpret and give meaning to their experiences of sexual desire? This research focuses on these processes of meaning-making, particularly on the development of meaning within the Subject's own trajectory and within their relationships with Others—relationships that serve as spaces for encounters and sometimes for conflict between different perspectives.

Dialogism thus emerges as an ideal framework for conceptualizing these questions.

Dialogism as a framework for studying desire

To highlight the processes of meaning-making in sexual desire and its implications for subjectivity and intersubjectivity, the theoretical framework adopted here is, firstly, that of cultural psychology. This perspective emphasizes the temporal embeddedness of individual trajectories, whether in terms of the historical and cultural context or the micro-histories of individuals, always singular (Sato et al., 2001; Valsiner, 2017). Drawing on Vygotsky, a central figure in this field, the coupling of meaning-making in our experiences with affectivity is fundamental to human existence (Vygotsky, 1934/2012). Furthermore, there are numerous points of convergence between cultural psychology and psychoanalysis, particularly concerning the role of semiotics in the construction of meaning (Zittoun, 2024).

Secondly, there are six arguments that justify the adoption of a dialogical approach and its relevance to our research topic, the first two of which are particularly important. 1) Among the many conceptions of intersubjectivity, Gillespie and Cornish propose the following definition: "We conceptualize intersubjectivity as the varieties of relations between perspectives. Those perspectives can belong to individuals, groups, or traditions and discourses, and they can manifest as both implicit (or taken for granted) and explicit (or reflected upon)" (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010, p. 4). According to these authors—and also Marková (2016)—dialogism is the most suitable approach for studying intersubjectivity, particularly for understanding the implicit aspects of discourse, those elements that are not explicitly expressed (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010; Marková, 2016). 2) The Dialogical Self Theory provides a rich framework for examining the various positions of the Self, or I-Positions (Hermans & Gieser, 2012; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010; Lengelle, 2021).

Additional arguments further support the choice of this theoretical framework. 3) Dialogism assumes that one's own mind and that of the Other are interdependent in their ascriptions of meaning to the world, their interpretations of the past, analyses of the present, and representations of the future (Bakhtin, 1981; Buber, 1923/2010; Marková, 2016; Rosenzweig, 2003; Todorov, 1981; Vygotsky, 1934/2012). 4) This pragmatic hermeneutics places language at the forefront, combining stylistics and semantics to understand psychic phenomena. 5) Through dialogical analysis, we can study voices within discourse, that is, the traces of elements from other dialogues reflected in language (Bakhtin, 1981). 6) Dialogism enables us to understand the individual and interactional dynamics of meaning-

making in eroticism, combining analytical rigor with depth. In sum, it is an ideal approach for addressing the question of desire.

We must now examine the methodological indicators that reveal naturalistic conceptions of desire within an individual's discourse. How can we identify the disruptions in intersubjectivity that such conceptions may potentially provoke?

Méthodology

Data collection

The case study presented is part of a broader research project conducted within the framework of my sexology practice. Between September 2021 and June 2024, 256 interviews were recorded with 25 patients³. Each interview lasted between 45 and 50 minutes, resulting in a corpus of approximately 194 hours of recordings. During the initial interview, the reasons for consultation related to the notion of desire were identified: for women, the request is typically explicit, often concerning inhibition of sexual desire [302.72 (F52.22)] (according to DSM-5 and ICD classification) (American Psychiatric Association, 2015); for men, the issue is often secondary, with the primary problem being almost always functional in nature [302.72 (F52.21)]. Once this identification is made, the most complete and personalized information about the current study is provided, particularly regarding its process, the participant's involvement, as well as anonymization and consent⁴. If the patient agrees to participate, the information and consent forms are given to them. During the next session, if they still agree to participate and sign the consent form, they enter the study. Since participant selection is based on the reason for consultation, none of the following parameters are considered: gender, age, cultural or religious context. It should also be noted that the interviews are clinical in nature and can be of two types: semi-structured during the early stages of treatment (the so-called assessment phase), or non-structured when the treatment is more advanced.

Data analysis

Out of the 256 interviews, 105 were selected from 22 patients, aged between 22 and 62 years, specifically addressing the theme of desire. From these 105 interviews, 269 excerpts were selected based on two criteria: 1) a broad lexical base related to sexual desire, including both nominal and verbal forms; 2) statements implicitly related to the theme of sexual desire. These may, for example, include cultural references that metaphorically describe an erotic situation, identified by context.

These excerpts were then transcribed and coded according to 25 themes, four of which are relevant to this study: 1) individual conceptions of desire; 2) the inscription of discourse within macro- or micro-historical temporality; 3) the relationship with the Other, particularly in relation to their desires, the connotations of relationships, and the affects involved in the meaning-making of desire; 4) the status of the Subject, based on the Dialogical Self Theory (Hermans & Gieser, 2012; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). The analysis itself was conducted in two phases: First, drawing on the inseparability of

³ I extend my warmest thanks to all the participants in this research.

⁴ This research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Canton of VD (CER-VD) on July 20, 2023 (CReq-2023-00882).

stylistics and semantics (Bakhtin, 1981), we systematically identified statements related to desire, whether based on explicit lexical usage or implicit meaning. This allowed us to compile a highly inventive list of more than eighty terms, over half of which were identified as naturalistic in nature. Some terms directly related to sexuality (e.g., desire for penis, penetration), while others were analogical (e.g., activating certain areas of the brain, need(s), consuming, awakened body, kinds of endorphins being released, hunger, releasing tension, body awakening), and still others, though denoting a physical or physiological experience, were expressed by allusion or metaphor (e.g., cleaver, thaw, normal dose of lubricant, nocturnal situations). It should be noted that naturalistic terminology of sexual desire is not exclusive to men in our research, although, as feminist psychologist Hollway (1984) points out, it is more prevalent among them.

In the second phase, we examined the linguistic indicators specific to the different conceptions, considering: (a) the terminology itself; (b) the personal pronouns used by the speaker to refer to themselves. This latter point allowed us to establish the status of the Subject in these statements (Raggatt, 2000, 2012); (c) the contextual, cultural, and historical data; (d) the presence or absence of the Other in discourse, indicating the relationship with the Other; (e) the presence of direct or indirect dialogical elements.

This method thus allows us to examine the extent to which desire is or is not dialogical. The following case study will illustrate these findings.

Ariane, the dynamics of instrumentalization

The case study presented here was chosen because it provides an especially illuminating example of the status of sexual objectification, helping us understand its dynamics quite precisely and fulfilling the methodological criteria for case studies (Chirkov, 2016), particularly the abductive method (Peirce, 1978; Zittoun, 2017). I focused on contextualizing the interviews historically and culturally, and prioritizing an in-depth analysis, some aspects of which will be presented here. The goal is to develop the dialogic dimension of the patient's discourse, that is, the way in which her speech contains traces of different conceptions of desire, thus revealing her dynamic of representations.

Ariane, a fifty-five-year-old woman, married and mother of two adult children, consults for anorgasmia (302.73 [F52.31]), as well as difficulty "liberating herself" (according to her own words). Sexuality has never truly been desired with her husband. She consents rather than desires. Although the consultation's main issue does not explicitly concern desire, it becomes evident from the first interview that it is a dimension of the problem. I have seven interviews with Ariane, from which 25 excerpts were selected according to the method described earlier.

The concept of need in Ariane's discourse

One of the specific features of these interviews is that they revolve around the unmet needs of her husband, as Ariane reports his statements. The term "need," recurring in the narratives of patients in sexology, belongs, as we saw, to the list of terminology relating to naturalistic types of desire. It was popularized by Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) and by the works of Rosenberg, the inventor of nonviolent communication (Rosenberg, 2015). Implicitly, it is one of the key concepts of Sexual Health (World Association for Sexual Health, 2008, 2019; World Health Organization, 2002), as sexuality is considered one of the physiological needs, as mentioned earlier.

However, the concept of need is not equivalent to that of desire. Desires refer to subjectivity, while needs are perceived as stemming from nature, so these concepts give the involved Subjects very different positions of the Self. The use of the term *need*, besides associating the sexual with physiology, may also bring a sense of urgency, both for the desiring Subject and for their partner, raising multiple ethical issues, such as the freedom of the Subject and the relationship between consent and desire.

This is precisely the problem Ariane faces. Not only are her husband's desires expressed in terms of needs, but she also reports several dialogues where her own desires are devalued by him (e.g., “your romantic ideas, that's a little girl's fairy tale vision”). At the beginning of the fourth interview, which focuses on the sexual needs of her husband and men in general, she explains that two or three years ago, her mother told her about being sexually assaulted when she was a teenager, which Ariane had herself experienced in similar circumstances. A few days before this interview, a family member reminded her of this episode and asked her questions about it. As the interview progresses, here is a brief excerpt from the 15th minute (S: sexologist; A: Ariane):

S: What connection do you make at this moment between the episode your [family member] reminds you of and the notion of sexual need in some men? (6 sec.) Is it just a reminder maybe? (9 sec.)

A: Otherwise, maybe I see myself, facing that, as (3 sec.) what they call boys cannon fodder, well, me, this is just (3 sec.) flesh to be consumed by men, really. (4;13)

For clarity, let's distinguish three statements in Ariane's response:

1st statement: Otherwise, maybe I see myself, facing that

2nd statement: as what they call boys cannon fodder

3rd statement: well, me, this is just (3 sec.) flesh to be consumed by men, really.

Ariane's response is striking, due to its discontinuity with the sexologist's questions, both stylistically and semantically. After a nine-second pause, she responds with an analogy between two metaphors. Metaphorical language, a common rhetorical device in interviews, serves to reformulate or clarify the statement (Salazar Orvig, 1999). Here, it is the patient who uses it, making it meaningful in itself. The first metaphor ('cannon fodder') (second statement) is well-known, while the second metaphor, created by Ariane herself, follows an analogy. The first metaphor (“they call boys cannon fodder”), introduced by a generalizing linguistic form refers strongly to the image of frontline soldiers, directly exposed to enemy fire, both weapons and human shields, in a conflict model where human value is nearly nonexistent. It evokes extreme instrumentalization, reducing human beings to mere objects destined for violent death. In the third statement, the second metaphor, created around the word "flesh" focuses on Ariane herself and suggests a degrading status in relation to men and the physiological expression of their desire. The progression of her speech invites us to think that the analogy is not merely rhetorical. Both images involve instrumentalization and degradation.

To understand this grim rhetoric, we must ask: who does Ariane refer to when she uses the term "men," or more generally, to which dialogues does she refer and with whom (Bakhtin, 1981)? Her discourse does not explicitly tell us. However, she primarily refers to her

husband and his way of expressing his desire, as this is explicitly mentioned earlier, but also, more implicitly, through the plural form, to potential previous partners or family members⁵. As for her own status, in terms of the dialogical Self, she adopts an Ambiguous Third Position (Raggatt, 2012), implicitly referring to values of respect, which are negatively invoked here — like the negative of a photographic cliché — in relation to the metaphor of "flesh to be consumed by men" which she feels assigned to (me, it's).

The pronoun *that* in the first statement offers us a striking example of multivocality in the sense of Bakhtin (1981). At first reading, it indeed implies several prior dialogues: the revelation by her mother about her own sexual assault, the dialogue with her daughter, discussions with her husband, and perhaps she is thinking about sexual relations with him, as well as dialogues with other men expressing their needs. All these exchanges take place with people she knows, on a sensitive subject, so much so that their emotional and affective dimension seems undeniable for Ariane.

In each of these implicit dialogues, Ariane's Self position is specific. The use of the pronoun *that* also suggests that these dialogues contribute to the elaboration of the figurative meaning through this surprising metaphor, and particularly to her own status as a Subject. To further highlight the implicitness of this statement and the dynamics of meaning, an analysis of other excerpts is necessary, as there are numerous relevant examples. In Ariane's narratives, several childhood episodes evoke dialogues with close relatives—grandmother, parents, schoolmates—where Ariane's Self, or in other words, her status as a Subject, is strongly undermined, either directly or indirectly. Two episodes explicitly linked to sexuality will illustrate this point.

What is Ariane's status as a Subject?

From the first interview, Ariane mentions that, as a young child, if she adjusted her underwear, her grandmother—who largely raised her—would scold her harshly and say: "Stop it, you're dirty, you're a dirty girl" (1;1), which left a strong impression on the little girl. In this same account, Ariane refers to her grandmother's Catholic fervor and questions her relationship to sexuality. Contextual data help us understand the grandmother's remark: the term "dirty" relates to notions of purity and impurity. Freud frequently discusses these notions in his works. In the second part of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (Freud, 1905/2006), he explicitly addresses this scenario, specifying that educators often label any sexual manifestation in children as vicious. In his famous work, Jankélévitch (1993) critiques the excessive moral and religious dimensions surrounding these notions of purity and impurity. According to Hervieu-Léger and Schlegel, sociologists of religion, until the 1950s in the Catholic Church, a true "catechism of purity" existed, encompassing under the term *impurity* anything related to sexuality "in thoughts, words, and deeds," which necessarily had to be revealed in confession, except for procreative sexual relations (Hervieu-Léger & Schlegel, 2022, p. 133). Ariane's grandmother, born in 1906, belongs to this generation.

However, as discussed during the interview, it is not sexuality that is labeled as dirty, but Ariane herself; not "it's dirty" but "you are dirty"—a moral judgment, implicitly referencing an ideal of purity incomprehensible to the child. Ariane obeys and internalizes the belief

⁵ Furthermore, later in the same interview, she added: "It's more than sexual, it's my entire upbringing that was designed to serve men" (4;14).

that, as a person⁶, she is indeed dirty if she touches her underwear. Ariane recounts this episode twice during the interviews, each time emphasizing its emotional dimension, caught between her grandmother's severity and her own obedience. In terms of the dialogical Self, Ariane is indirectly subjected to a religious imperative coupled with a devaluation of the Subject. Raggatt names the grandmother's position, subordinate to a religious authority, the Premodern model of self, and aptly describes Ariane's mirrored childhood position as the Shadow position (Raggatt, 2012).

The second episode, from the same interview (21 minutes in), concerns the brief sexual education Ariane received from her parents. This education took the form of an unusual metaphor concerning representations of sexuality and the status of the Self:

1 S: Did you receive any sexual education?

2 A: (Silence)

3 S: Any information?

4 A: Information... uh... I remember very well how, uh, my parents explained how babies are made (3 sec.) I don't know how old I was, but I was under 10 years old. I remember very clearly that they used the example of a glass into which you put a spoon—I can still see the glass, I can still see the spoon—and, well, that's how it worked.

5 S: A glass with a spoon?

6 A: Exactly, to show a cylinder and something going into the cylinder.

7 S: Okay (3 sec.) Mm.

(1; 2)

This excerpt is interesting in several ways. Without delving too deeply, note that the interlocutors in the reported dialogue in (4) (my parents) use a metaphor involving objects to signify penetration: analogies between a glass and a woman's vagina, and between a spoon and a man's penis. Regarding Ariane's status as a Self in her future sexual life (Hermans & Gieser, 2012), it is non-existent, obliterated by the absence of humanity. The sexual Self is not instrumentalized; it is symbolically annulled within the metaphor, as it involves no person, not even humanity—another instance of the Shadow position.

Ariane's account of pseudo-sexual education deeply affected me, not only because of its unprecedented dimension, which elicited surprise, but also because it revealed a form of intergenerational transmission of a degraded meaning of sexuality, and by extension, of the human person. Other experiences or accounts in Ariane's narratives further confirm the real harm to her Self, such as the sexual assault she endured. From my perspective as a sexologist, the connections between Ariane's narratives and the Self status she attributes to herself are readily apparent, yet it remains essential to understand her own logic of thought. When we situate the various events and reported dialogues in a temporal framework, the question of their chronicity within the narratives arises.

First, their temporal span is considerable, ranging from the episode of her mother's rape—an event that predates Ariane's birth by many years, even involving transgenerational discourses and events with the repetition of rape—to the discussion with a family member shortly before the interview. Second, we observe their (micro-)historical heterogeneity and

⁶ Not adhering to a dualistic view of the Human, I consider that harm to the body is harm to the person, unless the distinction is specified and necessary for understanding the context.

their diachronic invocation in temporal loops unfolding within the dialogues. Can we, despite this complexity, identify a dynamic process of meaning-making related to desire?

On an initial reading, the logic of these meanings may not be immediately apparent, as their dynamic stems from the transitions between dialogues, with her thoughts weaving between evocations, memories, and words, spanning multiple family interactions, interview dialogues, and reflexivity (internal position). However, upon closer examination, these dialogues share a common theme: they all revolve around sexuality, marked by overwhelmingly negative connotations, almost universally associated with violence, whether real or symbolic. Real violence pertains to the sexual assaults experienced or reported, while symbolic violence emerges in the words of her husband or grandmother and the dehumanization evident in the glass-and-spoon metaphor.

Nevertheless, the notion of violence remains too imprecise. Through the concept of the dialogical Self, we can more precisely trace the cognitive processes leading to the metaphor of flesh to be consumed. The reported dialogues exhibit a certain homogeneity in terms of Ariane’s Self positions (Raggatt, 2012). Between the pronoun "that" and the metaphor, particularly within the silences, she reflects on these dialogues, on the people who matter to her—both women and men—and with whom she existed as a shadow.

The recurrence of these episodes, although highly diverse, allows us to partially understand the mortiferous dimension of the metaphor of flesh to be consumed and also the generalization encapsulated in the term "men", since it is with them that she engages in her sexual experiences. The following diagram illustrates the thought processes that lead to this metaphor:

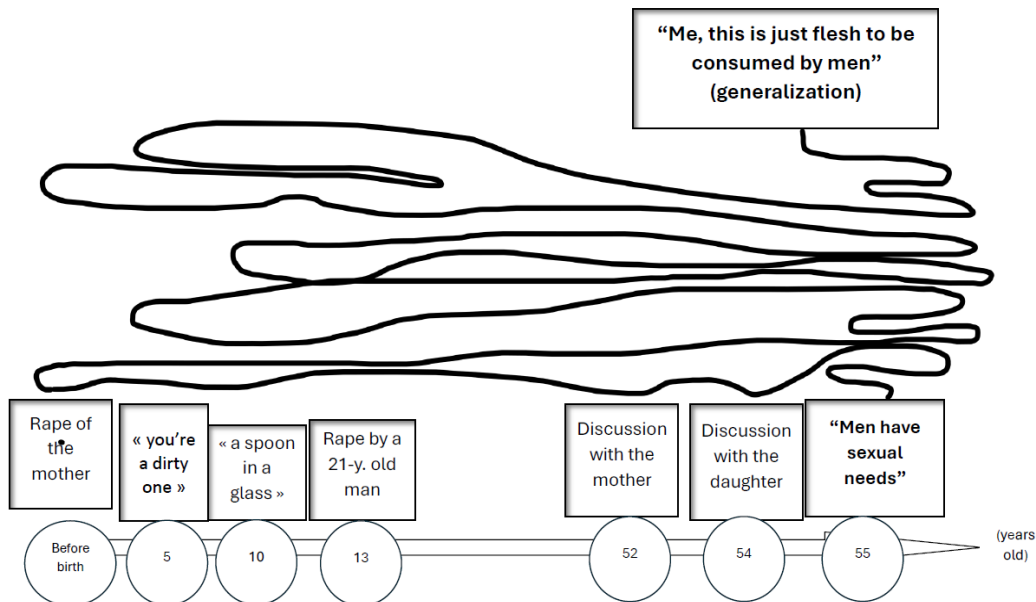


Figure 1: Thought process leading to metaphor of flesh to be consumed

Thus, although lamenting her status in relation to sexuality, Ariane gradually constructs meaning in small steps—a tentative reintegration of her status as a Subject despite her position as a sexual object and as an object within the discourse of the Other (her grandmother, her parents, men, and her husband). By uttering the pronoun "that", her thoughts move from one dialogue to another. In the words of others, her status is one of erasure (a shadow). However, in the first sequence of the initial excerpt, with the phrase I consider myself, she adopts a reflexive posture, under the hypothetical modality of perhaps, thus indicating a counter-position, a tentative alternative. The word "facing" designates her position as an observer. The same occurs in the narrative of her sexual education, which concludes with a similar type of turn of phrase (not shown here). The therapeutic process is underway.

What does this case study reveal?

From the perspective of lexical indicators pointing to an instrumentalization—or even an annihilation—of the Subject through objectification, the replacement of the Subject in its singularity with objects is the most tangible. We also observe the use of indefinite pronouns in French in place of the first person, consistent with recurrent shadow positions, reflecting the dynamics of the Subject's degradation, the long-term objectifying relationships embedded within the familial and cultural context, and dialogues and events of a similar nature. This extensive trajectory is reactivated and reinforced by the naturalistic discourse of the partner. Finally, where imagination exists, it does not in favour of an erotic imagination but rather manifests in the metaphors employed and in attempts at reflexivity.

The recurring representations of sexual desire expressed by Ariane in interviews—naturalistic (her husband's sexual needs), dehumanized (the glass and the spoon), or instrumentalizing the Other—have been partially or entirely internalized by the patient, evidenced by her harrowing metaphors. These representations share the commonality of excluding the perspective of the Other toward whom desire is directed—assuming there are even persons present in these conceptions of desire. This desire, stripped of the voice of the Other, or even of their very existence, radically impacts intersubjectivity. I propose that we term this a *monological desire*.

This case study also confirms the transgenerational historical temporality inscribed within the Subject's erotic universe regarding the religious and cultural references transmitted about sexuality and gender relations (Bafoil, 2021; Corbin, 2008; Perrot, 2009), as well as the repetition of sexual assaults. The dialogical analysis outlined earlier proves highly productive in this context. Unsurprisingly, it is within the very framework of affective relationships that this universe of meaning is constructed. What emerges is not representations or scripts but a unique person, a Subject attempting to construct meaning regarding intimate relationships with the Other.

It follows that the ethical dimension of sexuality is affirmed here, insofar as the relationship with the Other necessarily invokes values, at the very least concerning human dignity (Marková, 2016). While this is not a novel assertion, it is worth clarifying that any discourse on desire cannot be axiomatically neutral. That ethical questions are central to contemporary debates about sexuality is beyond doubt. They are prescriptive in nature. However, making explicit that the ethical dimension is intrinsically tied to the intersubjectivity of the erotic relationship is worth emphasizing.

What the brief excerpts provided for analysis do not indicate, however, is the existence of another trajectory—for Ariane as well as for most participants in this research—that of the erotic Subject in the proper sense, antithetical to the one I have presented. This trajectory comprises positive experiences. It includes statements featuring both the Subject and the Other, a dialogical desire, narratives of individuation, fantasies, and an alternative affectivity. These two trajectories occasionally intersect in therapeutic interviews, enabling the Subject to transition between these life paths—from one that crushes Eros to one that exalts it—in favour of a Subject of desire.

Conclusion: The theory of desire as engagement

In this article, I began by highlighting the various conceptions of sexual desire, emphasizing their lexical and semantic diversity. Among these, some portray naturalistic representations, while others conceptualize desire as rooted in intersubjectivity and the relationship with the Other. From the outset, I emphasized the ethical dimension underlying these different conceptions. Adopting a dialogical approach to theorize the notion of desire, I then proposed methodological tools to identify conceptions of desire within patients' discourse in sexology. I subsequently presented a case study, that of Ariane, which illustrated the psychic and ethical consequences of monological visions of sexual desire, as they may emerge in sexology interviews.

What, then, of the question of engagement? Research on sexual desire necessarily involves a form of engagement, for at least four reasons. First, by postulating that desire is inscribed within temporality—whether in terms of historical-cultural interactions or biographical microhistory—the theoretical and methodological approach is inherently humanistic (in the sense of the Humanities, i.e., multidisciplinary). This approach is demanding insofar as it requires more than a mere juxtaposition of perspectives or “disjunctive thinking” (Morin, 1992); it necessitates articulating these perspectives together, fostering transdisciplinarity. Second, engaging with the sensitive subject of desire prompts us to critically examine any potential ideological assumptions, identify their traces in our interviews, and confront them with the reality of our observations. The dialogical approach counters ideological generalizations with the precision of working on intersubjectivity, on the singular cultural, biographical, and relational components of the Subject. For instance, throughout my research and in the case study presented here, I observed that symbolic violence and the devaluation of sexual meaning cannot be exclusively attributed to men. Third, this research has confirmed the direct and indirect harms of pan-naturalistic (e.g., functionalist) sexual representations. More broadly, it underscores the significance of identifying monological desire. Fourth, engagement also entails refusing to view psychology as a third-person science. Instead, it requires the researcher to be personally involved in their object of study, which also implicates their own relationship with sexuality.

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