# Male Porn Use in Heterosexual Relationships: An IPA of the Female's Subjective Experience

Charlotte Deacon

U1139888

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## ABSTRACT

This study is aimed at exploring how female partners experience their male partners' use of pornography. It is reported that therapists are increasingly being called upon to support female partners presenting with difficulties relating to their male partners' porn use (Hall, 2015), but that clinicians feel under-prepared to work effectively with these clients due to a lack of training and the limited availability of empirically based literature (Ayres & Haddock, 2009). Consequently, there appears to be a growing need for research in this area that can provide insight and guidance for clinicians.

The phenomenological epistemology and relativist ontology that underpin this study place an emphasis on understanding the subjective lived experiences of the participants; a focus which seems congruent with the philosophical underpinnings of counselling psychology. Using a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six female participants. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis through which four master themes were identified: 'Pushing her limits of acceptance: The ongoing discoveries'; 'The female partner's meaning-making'; 'A lonely experience'; and 'The layers of loss'. New insights regarding the interplay between the female partners' meaning-making and their responses highlight the multi-layered and complex experiences of these participants.

A number of implications for practice are discussed including the importance of clinicians moving away from a model of pathology to one of promoting well-being and validating female partners' emotions and experiences regardless of whether a diagnosis (of porn or sexual addiction, for example) is present. The findings may serve to inform individual and group work with both female partners and male users, as well as couple work. Finally, it is hoped that providing insight into the lived experiences of female partners may encourage a more empathetic and understanding response from male porn users and society when

female partners seek their support. The limitations of the study are discussed as well as further areas for research.

# MALE PORN USE IN HETEROSEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS: THE FEMALE'S SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE

This thesis aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the subjective lived experiences of female partners in relation to their male partners' pornography use. Research suggests that females are increasingly seeking support in relation to their male partners' pornography use (Hall, 2015) and thus it is hoped that the current study will begin to address the lack of empirical research in this area (Schneider, 2002) and provide clinicians with insights that can serve to inform their practice.

My initial interest in this research began when I worked in a primary care setting conducting telephone triages. During some of the triages, I was struck by the distress that clients reported around their partner's use of pornography. It was a difficulty that I had not previously encountered, nor one to which I had ever given much consideration. The purpose of the telephone triages was to determine the most appropriate services to meet clients' needs; however with these clients, this tended to be particularly challenging as there was no clear pathway. I became interested in this area and began looking for research or services focusing on this difficulty. In doing so, I noted that, although there was a body of research looking at the porn user, there was very little research around, or support available to, their partners. Additionally, I feel that the focus on female partners reflects my interest in understanding individuals within the context of their relationships – perhaps also a factor that drew me to counselling psychology. Although not a situation that I have personally experienced, perhaps inevitably I have found myself considering what I would do if I were in my participants' situation. Throughout the research journey I have reflected on the influence this may have had on my approach to the research.

The focus of this thesis will be on the impact of porn use in heterosexual relationships, focusing in particular on the female partner's experience; the reasons for

which will be discussed in Chapter Two (Methodology). The study is underpinned by feminist theory, in particular the importance of recognizing the value of studying females in their own right, and the need for societal change on behalf of women (Unger & Crawford, 1992). Although research focusing on the experiences of female partners is slowly emerging (e.g. Bergner & Bridges, 2002; Resch & Alderson, 2013), there seems to be a lack of in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of these women (Manning & Watson, 2008; Tripodi, 2006). Although some studies have employed qualitative methodologies (Bergner & Bridges, 2002; Cavaglion & Rashty, 2010; Schneider, 2000), their use of online surveys and secondary data, in addition to their lack of transparency and rigour with regards to analysis, suggests a need for further qualitative research. As such, it would seem that further insight into the lived experiences of female partners of male porn users is necessary. Thus, the current research will employ a qualitative approach, analyzing the data using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) – a method of analysis aimed at exploring how participants make sense of their personal and social worlds, and the meaning that particular experiences and events hold for them (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The research focuses on the meanings underlying the narratives of the female partners, and the significance of their internal experiences within the context of their wider, social environment. As such, the primary analytic aim is phenomenological in that it is hoped that the subjective experiences of the female partners will be given a voice, therefore increasing awareness of this difficulty within society, and amongst practitioners.

While the literature pertaining to various fields (such as sex addiction and sex therapy) begins to give an insight into the effects of pornography use for female partners, in-depth searches revealed no research within the field of counselling psychology. The increase in reports of pornography related issues (Kor et al., 2014), as well as an increase in the number of individuals seeking help with this difficulty (Ayres & Haddock, 2009) means

that counselling psychologists are increasingly likely to encounter this presentation. Furthermore, the significance of both relational and individual elements of this difficulty means that counselling psychologists are arguably in a particularly good position to work with this client group. Despite the increasing prevalence of female partners seeking support in relation to their partner's use of pornography , therapists report feeling ill-equipped to work with this client group (Ayres & Haddock, 2009). As a researcher-practitioner I was keen to maintain relevance to practice and, from a counselling psychology perspective in particular, to gain in-depth accounts of the way in which a female partner may make sense of her partner's pornography use and the impact of this for her. This seemed an appropriate way of furthering understanding of this phenomenon and thus, informing clinical practice, especially given Zitzman and Butler's (2005) suggestion regarding the importance of incorporating the female partner's story and experience in therapeutic work.

## Overview of chapters

The first chapter will present a critical review of the existing literature. This will explore the challenges that accompany attempts at defining pornography and pornography use, as well as the tensions that arise from the interchangeable use of terms that seem inherently different in nature, for example porn use and cybersex. The positive, neutral and negative effects of pornography use for couples and partners will be discussed. The focus in the existing literature on the distress reported by female partners will be discussed in the context of psychological theories regarding the 'shattered assumptions' (Janoff-Bulman, 1992) that may result from the discovery of a partner's use of pornography, and the associated sense of loss. The chapter will conclude with reflections on the methodological choices in existing research, and the aims and research questions of the current study.

In the second chapter – Methodology – I will discuss my epistemological position and the rationale for choosing IPA. Following this, the process of data collection and

analysis will be described; ethical considerations, as well as the validity of the research, will also be discussed.

The third chapter – Analysis – will present the themes identified through the analysis (Figure 1). 12 sub-themes are clustered to form four master themes. The discussion of each sub-theme consists of extracts from the participant interviews and my interpretations of these.

The Discussion, which explores the analysis in the context of the existing literature, forms the fourth chapter. One area focused on in this chapter is the way in which the female partners' ongoing discoveries push them towards their limits of acceptance; their associated distress is explored in the context of theories regarding the expected characteristics of romantic love (Davis, 1986; Roberts, 1982). Also discussed is the way in which the meaning-making of female partners may impact their lived experience. The loneliness of this experience for female partners is discussed in relation to the social stigma that surrounds pornography (Hall, 2015), as well as the lack of societal and professional understanding that may lead female partners to feel betrayed not only by their male partners, but also by those around them. Finally, the discussion explores the sense of loss experienced by the female partners, and the way in which this may be exacerbated by the over-idealized initial perceptions that they seemed to hold of their relationship and male partner. Clinical implications and the relevance for counselling psychology are then presented, as well as critiques of the current study. The chapter concludes with suggestions for future research. As reflexivity has played a crucial role throughout the research process, it is weaved throughout every chapter (in italics).

# CHAPTER ONE
# A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This critical review of the existing literature will begin by exploring the challenges that accompany attempts at defining pornography and pornography use. The increase in self-reports of problematic pornography use will be discussed as well as the positive, neutral and negative effects of pornography use for relationships and partners. This will be followed by an exploration of the debate regarding models which pathologize female partners. The chapter concludes with the aims and research questions that will guide the current study.

## Challenges with Attempts to Define Pornography

In recent decades, scholars have offered and adapted several partially overlapping, and at times conflicting, definitions of pornography however a lack of consensus remains (Ayres & Haddock, 2009; Campbell & Kohut, 2017; Kor et al., 2014; Malamuth, 1999). Some define pornography as "material intended or expected to create arousal for the receiver" (Allen, Emmers, Gebhardt, & Giery, 1995, p. 13). Others argue that pornography must also contain abuse, subordination, depersonalization or violence against women (Bowen, 1987; Itzin, 1992). However, it is important to consider whether a single, agreed-upon definition of pornography is possible; as argued by Ciclitira (2002), "pornography is an elusive term with a range of meanings, dependent not only on cultural, social and historical contexts, but also on individuals' own experiences and beliefs" (p. 191).

## Pornography and the Internet

The growing pervasion of the internet over the last few decades has been accompanied by an increase in pornography consumption (Kor et al., 2014). Unlike the purchasing of pornographic videotapes and magazines, the internet has several features which make it an ideal medium for sexual behaviour (A. Cooper, Delmonico, & Burg,

2000; Schneider, Weiss, & Samenow, 2012). It is accessible, affordable and anonymous, known as the 'Triple-A Engine" effect (A. Cooper, 1998), as well as being legal, available in the privacy of one's own home, and not putting the user at direct risk of contracting a sexually-transmitted disease (Schneider, 2000). One might wonder if the appeal of anonymity begins to point to the possible societal stigma surrounding porn use. It is widely acknowledged that the Triple-A Engine effect, in particular, has been the driving force for, firstly, the increase in porn use of individuals previously using non-internet based pornography (i.e. magazines, videos), and secondly, the pornography use of individuals who may not have engaged with pornography prior to the arrival of the internet (A. Cooper, Boies, Maheu, & Greenfield, 2000).

## An Increase in Reports of 'Problematic' Pornography Use

Although research has found that most individuals who engage in online sexual activities, including porn use, report few if any issues (A. Cooper, Delmonico, et al., 2000), there has been an increase in self-reports of 'excessive', 'uncontrollable' and 'problematic' pornography use in recent decades (Kor et al., 2014; Voros, 2009). This has been accompanied by debate regarding how best to categorize such pornography use (Kor et al., 2014). Alongside this, various conceptualizations of 'pornography addiction' have been proposed (Kor et al., 2014). However, currently, no consensus has been reached regarding the measurement of excessive pornography use, and thus definitions are inconsistent and varied (Kor et al., 2014). The issue of whether or not the pathology 'pornography addiction' can be clearly distinguished from a 'healthy sexual state', is still a under debate by sexual health professionals (Voros, 2009). This uncertainty is reflected in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.; *DSM–5*; American Psychiatric Association, 2013), which in recent years has been debating whether to include a proposed diagnostic

addiction called 'hypersexual disorder', within which is a pornography subtype[1]. However, it was decided that there was insufficient evidence to include hypersexual disorder or its subtypes in the DSM-V (Kafka, 2013). Since then, continued research into this proposed diagnostic criteria has found that, of the individuals assessed in a field trial for the proposed criteria, 81% reported excessive pornography use as their primary problem (Reid, Carpenter, et al., 2012; Reid, Garos, & Fong, 2012).

Although issues around pornography use are not a recognized classification within the DSM-V, I would argue that this is not the sole criterion whereby something can be judged a valid issue worthy of research. Regardless of whether or not the DSM-5 recognizes such a classification, many clinicians report that issues around pornography use are increasingly being brought to the attention of mental health professionals (Ayres & Haddock, 2009; Goldberg, Peterson, Rosen, & Sara, 2008; Wood, 2011; Zitzman & Butler, 2005). It would therefore seem that the consequential issues arising from pornography use indicate that this is an area worthy of attention.

From a counselling psychology perspective, one might question whether diagnosis is necessary in order to work with a client's difficulties. Woolfe, Strawbridge, Douglas, and Dryden (2010) argue that counselling psychology maintains a questioning stance towards the 'medical model', and a preference for a more humanistic value base. In line with counselling psychology's value of promoting well-being as opposed to pathologizing (M. Cooper, 2009), it could be argued that such a classification – be it hypersexual disorder or sexual/pornography/cybersex addiction – is unnecessary when the focus should be on attending to the experience of the individual. Furthermore, criticisms within many

[1] The proposed diagnostic criteria for hypersexual disorder was characterized by diminished self-control over sexual engagement, excessive sexual behaviours, use of sex for avoiding or escaping negative emotions, as well as impaired functioning and personal distress (Kafka, 2010).

therapeutic communities posit that the terms sexual addict and pornography addict can be stigmatizing and do not account for the diversity in symptoms and severity (Hall, 2011). Additionally, these labels run the risk of pathologizing normal and commonplace behaviours (Hall, 2015).

**Tensions Arising From the Interchangeable Use of Inherently Different Terms**

It seems important at this point to acknowledge the range of terminology referred to throughout this chapter and the underlying reason for this. References in the current study to 'pornography addiction', 'sex addiction', or any other addiction for that matter, are a reflection of the terminology in the existing literature. Furthermore, these 'addictions' are often used interchangeably in the literature (e.g. Hall, 2015). Some literature also refers to 'problematic pornography use' or 'heavy pornography use', bringing the same challenges regarding the lack of consensus accompanying these classifications. Research exploring the effects of cybersex also seems to have relevance as online pornography can be seen as a category within cybersex (Delmonico, 1997). However, cybersex can be defined as "sexual arousal using computer technology, especially by wearing virtual reality equipment or by exchanging messages with another person via the Internet" (English Oxford Living Dictionaries), and thus it seems important to note that 'cybersex' seems to encompass a far broader range of sexual activities, including those that appear to be of a more interactive nature than viewing pornography. Additionally, some of the literature does not make any distinctions when online behaviour extends offline (e.g. Schneider et al., 2012).

It seems important to note the tensions that arise from the existing literature grouping sexual behaviours together that seem inherently different in nature. This appears to create a lack of distinction and clarity which consequently impacts the extent of understanding obtained regarding experiences relating to these behaviours. While the definitional issues surrounding these terms cannot be avoided entirely, it is hoped that the

inclusion of the criteria by which each study has determined these classifications will serve to provide some clarity. Previous researchers have noted similar limitations in the existing literature which tends to use terms such as porn use and cybersex interchangeably, thus failing to differentiate between participants whose partners engaged solely in pornography use, and those whose partners engaged in interactive online sexual activities (Bridges, Bergner, & Hesson-McInnis, 2003; Campbell & Kohut, 2017). It would therefore seem that research focusing on specific sexual behaviours may serve to provide distinctions which appear to have become lost in the existing literature.

*In exploring the literature, I have found this tension particularly difficult to navigate and the lack of distinction between these behaviours has been a source of much confusion. Efforts to understand the relevance of existing literature to the current study by attempting to tease apart behaviours, has failed to provide much clarity. As a result, I considered broadening my own research to look at online sexual behaviour, however I felt that doing so would fail to address the existing tension and thus I elected to maintain a focus on porn use specifically. Much time was spent debating whether to include a definition of pornography within the current study. My conclusion was that, whilst I concur that definitions are dependent on individual beliefs, this inevitably means that I also hold beliefs about what constitutes pornography. Although no limitations are imposed throughout this study, for the sake of transparency, I will share the definition that sits best with me: "written, pictorial, or audio-visual representations depicting nudity or sexual behaviour" (Campbell & Kohut, 2017, p. 6).*

Additionally, whilst a focus solely on research exploring porn use would have been preferable, the limited research in this area has made it necessary to draw on research relating to other sexual behaviours in order to gain an insight into the existing understanding regarding the experiences of female partners. Although the literature search

began with 'keyword searching' using terms such as 'pornography' and 'female partner' to search databases including Academic Search Complete and PsycINFO, few studies of relevance were returned and so the search was widened. Citation searches through Scopus, as well as searches within specific journals such as 'Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy' and 'Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity', returned further studies. Despite widening the search, there were still only a few key studies of particular relevance found. No literature was found specifically in the field of counselling psychology and in light of this, the literature discussed comes from a variety of fields.

## The Impact of Pornography Consumption for Couples and Partners

With the increase in internet use, it is suggested that pornography consumption in heterosexual relationships may be increasing (Olmstead, Negash, Pasley, & Fincham, 2013). However, numerous researchers highlight the lack of empirical research focusing on the impact of pornography use on partners and relationships (McCarthy, 2002; Schneider, 2002; Schneider, Corley, & Irons, 1998; Wildmon-White & Young, 2002). Whilst aiming to understand the experiences of female partners, the current study takes the view that the female partner is inevitably experiencing her partner's porn use within the context of the relationship and thus tends to approach the literature from a relational perspective through a social psychology lens.

The majority of existing research has focused on a male porn user and female partner (Manning, 2006; Newstrom & Harris, 2016). Some have cited A. Cooper, Delmonico, et al.'s (2000) study as the reason for this, claiming that the research reports that the majority of pornography consumers and those dealing with sexual addictions are male heterosexuals in a committed relationship (e.g. Ayres & Haddock, 2009; Hentsch-Cowles & Brock, 2013; Manning, 2006). However, it would seem that the rationale of these researchers is based on inaccurately drawn conclusions. A. Cooper, Delmonico, et al.

(2000) empirically examine the usage patterns and characteristics of individuals using the internet for sexual purposes. The authors organize their participants into four categories, and show that married heterosexual males have the highest prevalence in the Cybersex Compulsive group; however, married heterosexual males also have the highest presence in the other three groups. This would suggest that the findings reflect the sample rather than determining patterns across varying demographic categories. In fact, the percentages calculated indicated that homosexuals and bisexuals were more likely than heterosexuals to be in the cybersex compulsive group. Thus it would seem that research exploring the impact of porn use within other groups would also be relevant. Nevertheless, research exploring the impact of porn use has focused on a male porn user and female partner.

**Positive and Neutral Experiences of Pornography use within Couples**

From the existing literature, it would seem that systemic research reporting positive and neutral experiences often results from quantitative studies. Bridges et al. (2003) developed the Pornography Distress Scale (PDS) in order to assess the presence or absence of the distress-related themes identified in previous research. The PDS comprised 50 statements (both positive and negative) about perceptions of a partner's use of pornography and used a 7-point Likert scale through which participants could indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with the statements. The researchers reported that their 100 female participants tended to present neutral to positive statements regarding their male partner's porn use. Although the researchers report that they collected demographics such as participants' age, ethnicity and religion, this information is not provided so it is difficult to contextualize the findings.

Fuller (1996) found that the marital interaction and satisfaction of female partners was not affected by whether or not their partners used pornography. Maddox, Rhoades, and Markman (2011) reported that, amongst their sample of 1291 participants in romantic

relationships, 44.8% watched pornography with their partners and reported increased dedication to their relationship as well as higher sexual satisfaction than those who reported lone pornography use. Similarly, Manning (2006) posits that, if consumed in a consensual, open, and mutual way, pornography can enrich marital intimacy. However, she reports that mutual pornography use is rarely discussed in the literature; suggesting that this may be because among today's couples, mutual pornography use is the exception rather than the norm, and because it is unlikely that couples mutually engaging in pornography use will seek help. Manning (2006) suggests that further research into mutual pornography use could serve to clarify the differences between couples who mutually engage in pornography use, and those who view pornography alone and in secret. There seems to be a dichotomy in the way that pornography consumption is considered in the literature as either mutual or individually in secret. I wonder if there are other positions to be considered such as watching pornography alone but being open about it. Might these give rise to other experiences and views regarding pornography use?

**Negative Impacts of Pornography Use: The Experiences of Female Partners**

Although research suggests that pornography use in romantic relationships can have both positive and negative effects (Campbell & Kohut, 2017; Newstrom & Harris, 2016), the qualitative literature specifically regarding female partners' experiences of their male partners' pornography consumption seems to predominantly report negative experiences. Through an online survey consisting of demographic questions (regarding gender, age, sexual orientation and relationship status), as well as multiple choice and open-ended questions, Schneider et al. (2012) explored the experiences of partners affected by cybersex

infidelity[2]. Although the authors do not provide information regarding their methodology, they state that 87.5% of their 35 respondents (29 female and 5 male) reported that their partner's cybersex activities had had an overall negative effect on their relationship. More specifically, research has reported the negative consequences for the sexual relationship, her emotional wellbeing, and her view of herself, her male partner and her relationship (Bergner & Bridges, 2002; A. Cooper, Boies, et al., 2000; A. Cooper, Delmonico, et al., 2000; Manning, 2006; Schneider, 2000; Schneider et al., 2012); each of which will be discussed in more detail.

Schneider (2000) employed qualitative research methods to explore the systemic effects of cybersex addiction[3]. 94 respondents (91 females and 3 males) completed and returned a brief survey via e-mail or post. Using open ended questions, the survey enquired about the adverse effects of cybersex on the participants as well as enquiring about individual and couple attempts at resolving the problems. Two thirds of the respondents reported that their male partners' activities were the cause of the couples' sexual problems. Schneider (2000) reported that one third of partners and half of the cybersex addicts had lost interest in sexual relations within the couple. It was reported that for the cybersex user who had replaced sex with cybersex, this was not an issue; however, this remained an issue for the partners who reported feelings of anger, hurt, and rejection (Schneider, 2000).

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[2] Schneider et al. (2012) do not define what they mean by 'cybersex' however the behaviours that they refer to imply that cybersex includes viewing pornography (with or without masturbation), sexual chatting and viewing porn, and chatting and then later meeting up with that person. They state that 32.4% of their participants reported that the online behaviours had extended offline but do not seem to draw any distinctions between those whose partners' behaviours did and did not extend offline and the way in which this may influence their experience and perception of whether their partner has 'cheated'.

[3] In Schneider's (2000) study, it would seem that references to cybersex addiction, although "informal" and not to be "construed as definitive medical diagnosis" (p. 35), are based on the characteristics of "any addiction disorder" (p. 35), namely, the loss of control, continuation despite adverse consequences, and pre-occupation or obsession with the activity.

Also provided by the existing literature regarding porn use, cybersex and sexual addictions is extensive lists of the emotions reported by female partners including despair, hurt, shame, anxiety, hopelessness, rejection, abandonment, devastation, fear, loneliness, isolation, betrayal, suspicion, mistrust, jealousy and loss of self-esteem (Bergner & Bridges, 2002; Cavaglion & Rashty, 2010; Schneider, 2000; Schneider et al., 2012). Other responses included extreme anger or rage, self-doubt or self-blame, and pain over the loss of past perceptions of the relationship (Schneider et al., 2012).

Newstrom and Harris (2016) highlight that a significant criticism of the qualitative studies in this area is their failure to specify their analysis technique, raising questions regarding the trustworthiness of the findings. Schneider (2000), for example, organizes her data into themes and provides percentages and quotations to support these, successfully highlighting the various impacts of pornography use on partners. However Schneider's (2000) lack of transparency regarding the analysis through which she identified these themes may leave one wondering whether the themes were pre-determined by the questions and the researcher's existing assumptions or beliefs. Furthermore, no information is given regarding the statistical analysis thus making it unclear as to how the researcher determined prevalence scores from responses to open-ended questions.

Bergner and Bridges (2002) collected and studied 100 posts from four online message boards by "spouses, fiancés, and girlfriends of men perceived to be heavily involved in pornography" (p. 194). They state that the anonymous nature of the posts meant that ascertaining any demographic information was not possible. In exploring the

significance of "heavy and habitual" (p. 194) porn use[4] for female partners, the authors described that the women in their study seemed to perceive their partners' pornography use as an indicator of their worth, value and desirability, believing that his pornography use meant that she must be sexually undesirable, worthless, weak or stupid (Bergner & Bridges, 2002). Descriptions of themselves as fat, ugly, old, unlovable and repulsive were also commonplace (Bergner & Bridges, 2002; Cavaglion & Rashty, 2010; Schneider, 2000, 2002; Schneider et al., 2012). The participants reasoned that if they were good enough, they would have been able to hold their male partner's attention and affection, and that this would never have happened (Bergner & Bridges, 2002). This seems to echo the feminist argument that women's value in society and their feelings of self-worth are anchored in society's patriarchal values and precepts concerning what it means to be a woman (Tindall, Robinson, & Kagan, 2010).It would seem that the female partners perceived their self-worth as anchored in their male partners' perceptions and behaviours. As such, their male partners' porn use led to the female partners holding negative perceptions of themselves. Furthermore, one might wonder if there was an element of the female partners feeling that their experiences were a reflection on their value as a 'woman'. Perhaps their sense of not being 'good enough', in their eyes, reflects a failure to meet societal expectations of what it means to be female.

Another recurring theme was that, physically, the female partners felt that they could not measure up to the impossible ideal of the women displayed in the pornography, and they felt hopeless about their ability to compete with them (Bergner & Bridges, 2002;

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[4] It seems that the criteria by which the "heavy and habitual" (p. 194) porn use was determined was threefold: (1) that the porn use was significantly interfering with the porn user's relational and vocational functioning, (2) viewing for several hours a day, and (3) the porn user had been unwilling or unable to cease their use of pornography.

Schneider, 2000). This seems to echo feminist theory which has criticized the media and pornography industry for the unrealistic body ideals they present, suggesting that these can have a detrimental impact on women's mental health (Wolf, 1990). As well as the impact on her view of herself, existing studies note the impact on the female partners' views of their male partners. Bergner and Bridges (2002) highlight that the women in their study reported a new view of their male partners as sexually questionable and degraded, a liar, unloving and selfish, and an inadequate father and husband. Furthermore, the degree to which she perceived him to be repentant for his behaviour impacted her view and her willingness to remain in the relationship (Bergner & Bridges, 2002).

However, in terms of their methodology, Bergner and Bridges (2002) give little information. They state that the letters forming their data were "studied intensively" (p. 195), and major recurring themes identified. No further information regarding the analysis process is provided. Furthermore, the authors state that the sample seems "consonant with the first author's clinical experience of women who come to therapy with concerns about their partners' use of pornography" (p. 195), but do not acknowledge the potential influence of this on them identifying themes. Thus, the lack of transparency and rigour brings into question the validity and quality of this study (Yardley, 2000).

Using narrative analysis, Cavaglion and Rashty (2010) examined 1,130 messages posted in two Italian forums that "deal with the issue of male [porn] dependence" (p. 270). Given the anonymous nature of online forums, the authors identify a limitation in the lack of obtainable information regarding the participants' demographics. In exploring the narratives of suffering among female partners of male "cybersex and cyber-porn

dependents[5]" (p. 270) the authors reported the female partners' mental dichotomization of their "good" and "bad" partners, seemingly unable to integrate these into a new form. The authors also reported that the narratives contained a significant split between a perfect past life and the present crisis, with the discovery of their male partners' activities as the turning point. It seems that with discovery, the previously idealized image of her relationship and perfect partner collapsed.

Cavaglion and Rashty (2010) argue that their data provides them with "first-hand material about the issue, and thus avoids academic and professional mediation or any sort of second hand interpretation" (p. 272). However, not only does narrative analysis involve examining the data from a variety of interpretative perspectives (Hiles & Cermák, 2008), but in this study, the authors translated the messages from Italian to English. In discussing the challenges of translation, Van Nes, Abma, Jonsson, and Deeg (2010) note that although language is used to express meaning, it also influences the way in which meaning is constructed, and thus translation is inevitably an interpretative act. This, as well as the co-construction of narratives, seems to be overlooked by Cavaglion and Rashty (2010). Given its assured place within qualitative research (Finlay, 2002), I have been troubled by the lack of reflexivity in the existing qualitative studies. The authors show no acknowledgement of the assumptions, beliefs, and biases with which they approached the research, and the impact that these may have had throughout the research.

In summary, although the existing literature begins to provide an insight into the various impacts of pornography use for female partners, it seems that the method of data collection - namely online surveys and analysis of pre-existing textual data - limit the depth

[5] Cavaglion and Rashty (2010) do not specify the criteria by which cybersex and cyber-porn dependents are classified. They state that "the male partners' activities were not clearly defined by the participants" (p. 275) and thus it would seem that the terms employed are simply a reflection of the names of the online message boards from which they collected their data.

of understanding with regards to their lived experiences. Furthermore, the lack of reflexivity and methodological transparency raises questions about the validity of the existing qualitative research. Thus, it seems that further qualitative research is needed in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of female partners in relation to their male partners' pornography use.

## The Prevalence of a Harm-focused Approach

Campbell and Kohut (2017) suggest that the selection bias in the 'harm-focused' approach adopted in much of the existing qualitative research (e.g. Bergner & Bridges, 2002; Cavaglion & Rashty, 2010; Schneider, 2000) may have contributed to the consistent reports of the negative impacts of male porn use in heterosexual relationships (Manning, 2006). Bridges et al. (2003) later acknowledged the limitations of their previous sample and conducted a second study to determine the prevalence of the highly negative and distressing experiences reported in their initial study amongst the general population. They determined that the experiences in their initial study were not representative of women in general; however they identified a substantial minority of women (approximately one third) who did report that they experienced their male partners' porn use as highly negative and distressing.

Bergner and Bridges' (2003) study seems to highlight that the tendency of previous studies to adopt a 'harm-focused' approach when exploring the experiences of female partners may have contributed to the high prevalence of negative and distressing experiences reported by female partners. Thus it seems that there is a need for qualitative research that takes an open approach to this topic, allowing for positive, neutral and negative experiences. Perhaps this tendency to focus on negative experiences is also reflected in the prevalence of pathologizing models.

## A Tendency towards a Medical Model of Pathology

Schneider et al. (2012) note that partners who experience a range of emotions in response to their male partners' pornography use may question whether their feelings are a normal and expected response, or indicative of pathology. Although from a counselling psychology perspective the focus is on facilitating and promoting well-being as opposed to responding to pathology (M. Cooper, 2009), it seems important to acknowledge these concerns, particularly as these feelings have previously led to labels such as 'co-addict' and 'co-dependent', that define the female partner as having a 'disease' and place an equal amount of blame and responsibility on her for the development, maintenance and cessation of the problem. Although many dispute and are even angered by this label, in Schneider et al.'s (2012) study, many of the women self-identified as "co-dependent" or "co-addicted". However, Schneider et al. (2012) acknowledge that their convenience sample, obtained through sexual addiction treatment centre websites, may have created bias. Furthermore, as the authors do not include their survey questions, it is not possible to determine how the participants came to identify as "co-dependent" or "co-addicted". For example, a question such as "Do you identify with the labels co-dependent and co-addict?" would be significantly different to the participants' independently referring to these labels.

From a feminist perspective, co-dependency and the suggestion that the co-dependent woman is sick and in need of recovery, has received much criticism (Babcock, 1991; Brown, 1990). Feminist writers argue that labelling a woman as 'sick' when in fact she is surviving in, and coping with a relationship with an addict, is simply a form of blaming the victim (Babcock, 1990, cited in Collins, 1993), and implies that she has a pathological need to continue the relationship and the partner's addictive behaviour (Collins, 1993). Feminists also argue that the majority of characteristics attributed to co-dependency are facets of the traditional picture of womanhood (Babcock, 1991; Brown,

1990). It is therefore argued that the literature regarding co-dependency is in essence telling women that their femininity is pathological, and that because of this, they can only blame themselves.

*I found it challenging to accept labels that pathologized the female partners as having a 'disease' as this does not fit with my personal position of avoiding labelling and pathologizing, not just in relation to porn use, but also more generally. I was also moved by the multitude of angry responses to these labels from female partners whilst exploring this topic (see footnote 6 for an example).*

The existing research also seems to have more implicit factors that highlight a potential steer towards a medical model. For example, although Schneider (2000) states that "the use of the term "cybersex addict" in her article is informal and should not be construed as a definitive medical diagnosis" (p. 35), it is noteworthy that she still elected to employ this medicalized term. Schneider et al. (2012) present the impossibility of determining whether participants or their partners meet the criteria for various clinical disorders as a limitation. Bergner and Bridges (2002) state their lack of direct access to the male partner as a limitation, implying that the lack of assessment of the male partner somehow removes the validity of the female partner's narratives. If Bergner and Bridges' (2002) aim is to gain insight into the female partners' experiences, which seems to be the case from the data they present, is the direct assessment of the male necessary? In light of this, it would seem that

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[6] Taken from a book review of 'Mending a Shattered Heart' on Amazon – "To label a partner a co-addict just because she/he unknowingly ended up in a relationship with a sex addict (all of which are accomplished compulsive liars!) and imply that they have any role in the sex addiction of their spouse or are in anyway "diseased" because of this relationship, is treatment induced trauma and it must STOP! Not one of the listed references provided in this book sites research findings that validates the use of this label in any situation. And that is because there is NO research based evidence that justifies the use of this very damaging label. Mental Health professionals have an inherent responsibility to do no harm. Therefore, the use of the co-addiction model in the treatment of partners suffering from a devastating relational trauma, which was induced by the sexual addiction of their spouse, has to stop".

further research focusing on female partners' subjective experiences is needed in order to facilitate a move away from tendencies to pathologize, moving instead towards an understanding and appreciation of their lived experiences, and in particular, the importance of recognizing the experiences of women in their own right (regardless of labels and diagnoses). This seems to echo a feminist approach in which the valuation of women as being intrinsically worthy of study (as opposed to their simply being contrasted with men) is highlighted (Unger & Crawford, 1992).

**How Can We Understand the Hurt and Distress of Female Partners?**

Although research indicates that positive and neutral experiences exist, the majority of qualitative studies have focused on a distressed population and thus the theoretical conceptualizations seem to focus on understanding the hurt and distress of female partners. However, it seems important to continue to hold in mind that this is one possible response, and that these are possible reasons for this response. Janoff-Bulman (1992) theorizes that traumatic events can force a sudden realization and shattering of one's rose-tinted fundamental assumptions – he refers to this as 'shattered assumptions'. He posits that in order to understand the sadness that accompanies such experiences, one must go beyond simply recognizing that individuals may now see the world – and more specifically in this case, see their relationship, partner and themselves – more negatively, but also acknowledging the loss underlying the change in their view. "Psychologically, the shattering of fundamental assumptions produces a state of both loss and disintegration" (Janoff-Bulman, 1992, p. 71). Hall (2015) describes this loss as 'abstract', suggesting that unlike divorce or bereavement, the physical person remains. Instead, there is a sense of losing a dream or fantasy which was perceived as reality. In addition, Hall (2015) refers to the loss of relationship characteristics such as fidelity and trust that female partners had assumed were present. Bergner and Bridges (2002) refer to previous research (e.g. Davis,

1986; Roberts, 1982) highlighting the following characteristics as typically associated with romantic love: (1) investment in the wellbeing of the beloved, (2) respect, (3) admiration, (4) sexual desire, (5) intimacy, (6) commitment, (7) exclusivity, and (8) understanding. Bergner and Bridges (2002) propose that when events occur that are incongruent with this depiction – such as discovering that one's partner is secretly viewing pornography or engaging in extra-marital activities – they are perceived to represent violations of the love relationship thus resulting in the distress of female partners.

Zitzman and Butler (2009) argue that, in light of the incongruence between the nature of porn use and the characteristics of love relationships, it is not surprising that female partners have used words such as "betrayal", "cheating" and "affair" (Bergner & Bridges, 2002; Schneider et al., 2012) and perceive online affairs to be akin to, and as emotionally painful as, offline affairs (A. Cooper, Delmonico, et al., 2000; Schneider, 2000; Whitty, 2003). It is consistently reported that the deepest pain is caused, not by the porn use itself or any particular sexual act, but by side effects such as the lying and the betrayal of their trust (Cavaglion & Rashty, 2010; Schneider, 2000). Schneider et al. (2012) posit that, when viewed in light of betrayal trauma, the responses of the female partners, including their feelings about themselves of being unlovable, unworthy, and sexually unattractive, can be considered normative.

## Existing Therapeutic Frameworks

The limited literature available in this area means that, although some suggestions regarding working with female partners of porn users are available, as previously highlighted, they rarely distinguish between behaviours, and suggestions are often presented in relation to diagnosis (e.g. Bergner & Bridges, 2002; Manning & Watson, 2008). Ayres and Haddock (2009) identify five themes across therapeutic suggestions: (1) to conduct a thorough assessment of the pornography use and potential for sexual addiction;

(2) to place responsibility for change on the pornography user, avoiding pathologizing and placing inappropriate amounts of responsibility on the partner; (3) when an addiction is diagnosed, and the non-using partner is reporting distress, the focus should be on terminating the porn use, and subsequently exploring the underlying couple dynamics that may need attention; (4) to validate the non-using partner's feelings and distress; and (5) to engage the couple in discussions regarding the culture of pornography and how they wish to respond.

As mentioned, Ayres and Haddock's (2009) first suggestion recommends a thorough assessment of the pornography use and potential for sexual addiction. For example, Bergner and Bridges (2002), who focus on the significance of heavy pornography involvement for female partners, state that their therapeutic recommendations are intended for clinical situations where "careful assessment reveals that the female partner is correct in her perception that her partner is pathologically involved in pornography use, as indicated by such dimensions as amount of time spent, inability to cease use, and serious interference with relational and vocational functioning" (Bergner & Bridges, 2002, p. 200). However, one might argue that suggesting it necessary to determine whether or not "the female partner is *correct*" [italicized for emphasis] in her perception seems problematic. Firstly, how would this be determined given the lack of consensus regarding the classification of 'excessive' pornography use (Kor et al., 2014); secondly, a female partner may be presenting for help alone, and thus clinicians would be unable to directly assess the male partner's pornography use; and thirdly, identifying the presence of 'pathological involvement' does not change the experience of the female partner, and thus her distress should be considered equally valid regardless of whether or not 'pathology' is identified. From a feminist perspective, one might argue that the experiences presented by female partners should be accepted in their own right rather than consideration of those

experiences being dependent on the male partner in any way. This would seem to be of particular importance given that such a prioritization of the male partner's presentation within professional services may echo the previously reported sense of alienation experienced by some women when seeking support from health care services (Tindall et al., 2010).

## Aims and Research Questions

This literature review has highlighted the challenges that arise from several sexual behaviours being grouped together in the existing research. Whilst appreciating that overlap may still occur, the current study will focus on pornography use specifically in an attempt to begin to recognize these as distinct behaviours which may therefore be accompanied by distinct experiences. Given the lack of empirical research focusing on the impact of pornography use on partners (McCarthy, 2002; Schneider, 2002; Schneider et al., 1998; Wildmon-White & Young, 2002), and the concerns regarding the methodological rigour of existing qualitative studies (Newstrom & Harris, 2016), it would seem that further qualitative research is needed in this area. Furthermore, although the existing literature has highlighted the significant impact that pornography use can have on female partners, the methodologies employed – namely online surveys and analysis of pre-existing textual data – seem to remove the possibility for in-depth understanding of the subjective lived experiences. The existing studies also seem to have left little space for any female partners who may have had any positive or neutral experiences; therefore, the current study will be open to all aspects of the female partners' experiences. Furthermore, some of the existing literature has tended to pathologize female partners as having a 'disease' and thus, the current study will focus on female partners (as opposed to other partners) with the aim of moving away from a medical model of pathology, to one of understanding subjective lived experience. Given reports of an increase in female partners seeking help for porn-related

issues (Ayres & Haddock, 2009; Goldberg et al., 2008; Hall, 2015; Hentsch-Cowles & Brock, 2013; Wood, 2011), it seems concerning that clinicians feel ill-equipped to work with this client group (Ayres & Haddock, 2009). Zitzman and Butler (2005) suggest the importance of honouring and incorporating the female partner's story and experience in therapeutic work and thus it seems that an understanding of the lived experience could provide valuable insight for professionals working with this client group.

In line with the focus on female partners as well as the aim of increasing societal and professional awareness of the difficulties that can be experienced by female partners in relation to their male partners' use of pornography, this research is underpinned by a feminist approach. J. Grant (2013) posits that there is no single feminist theory. Rather, feminist theory has multiple focuses and is indefinable. Feminist theories are often categorized according to their attachment to particular 'male theories' and their attempts to appropriate the terms and reduce the male-biased assumptions of such 'male theories'. J. Grant (2013) refers to this as a 'hyphenation model' suggesting that while this has led to feminist theories such as 'psychoanalytic feminism,' 'Marxist feminism,' 'existentialist feminism' and 'liberal feminism' the resultant feminist theory may be perceived as a sticking-plaster on the essentially misogynist social and political philosophies of the West.

It is beyond the scope of this project to explore the extensive feminist theories so for the present purpose, I will outline the ways in which the current research aligns itself with feminist thinking. Unger and Crawford (1992) suggest that two of the common themes within feminist psychology are (1) the recognition of females as being worthy of study in their own right rather than solely in comparison with men, and (2) the acknowledgement of the need for societal change on behalf of women, both of which mirror the values and aims underpinning the current research. Thus, the feminist theory underpinning the current study is not one that is attached to a particular male theory; rather the feminist approach of the

current research is one that focuses on understanding women's lives and experiences (in their own right) in the hope of raising societal and professional awareness in an area that currently remains relatively unexplored. Another aim within feminist theory is to challenge those psychological theories regarding women which are deemed damaging and inadequate (Unger & Crawford, 1992). In wanting to move away from the tendency of previous research to draw on models of pathology, such as co-dependency, it seems that this feminist aim is also of particular relevance to the current research.

Ultimately, the lives and experiences of women form the core of feminist work and Tindall et al. (2010) highlight the need for counselling psychologists to be mindful of the challenges faced by women. In light of this, the current research will aim to gain an in-depth understanding of the subjective experiences of female partners through the exploration of two research questions:

(1) How do female partners make sense of their male partners' pornography use?

(2) What are the values, beliefs and meanings that female partners attach to the pornography use of their male partners, and how do these impact her experience?

# CHAPTER TWO
# METHODOLOGY

This section discuses the rationale for the chosen method, and describes the process of data collection and analysis. Ethical considerations, reflexivity, and the validity of the research are also discussed. Reflexivity on the research process is included throughout with a view to providing transparency.

## Qualitative Research Approach

As the aim of the study was to gain detailed accounts of participants' subjective lived experiences in order to attend to the gap identified in the literature, a qualitative approach seemed most appropriate. The research did not aim to identify a single truth about the experiences of the female partners in order to make general claims about a given population (Creswell, 2009). Rather, it aimed to give a rich account of their subjective experiences by focusing on their meaning-making (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008) – a reflection of my phenomenological epistemological position.

## Epistemological Position

Methodological choices are underpinned by the research paradigm, defined as the "basic belief system or world view that guides the investigation" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 105). This comprises assumptions regarding the nature of reality (ontology), the process of acquiring knowledge (methodology), and the relationship between the "knower" (research participant) and the "would-be knower" (the researcher) (epistemology) (Ponterotto, 2005). Although counselling psychology has adopted qualitative methods more so than other branches of psychology (Hill & Gronsky, 1984; Hoshmand, 1989; Morrow, 2007; Morrow & Smith, 2000), psychology has nevertheless been dominated by quantitative research rooted in positivist and post-positivist paradigms (Camic, Rhodes, & Yardley, 2003; McLeod, 2011). Kasket and Gil-Rodriguez (2011) highlight the struggle within counselling

psychology of navigating firstly, a focus on the subjective and phenomenological experience of individuals, thus favouring understanding over generalized claims said to represent a single truth; and secondly, the pressure to produce scientific evidence in line with that which is accepted and evaluated as 'valid' within traditional scientific psychology. As such, tensions arise for counselling psychologists attempting to navigate these differing paradigms (Orlans & Van Scoyoc, 2008).

In the counselling psychology literature, the major paradigms are often organized into four groups: positivist, post-positivist, phenomenological and social constructionist. Although a continuum may better capture the tensions and overlap within and across these positions, these paradigms provide a starting point for their consideration (Morrow, 2007). The positivist approach adheres to the hypothetico-deductive method (Cacioppo, Semin, & Berntson, 2004; McGrath & Johnson, 2003) in seeking to "explain and predict what happens in the social world by searching for regularities and causal relationships between its constituent elements" (Burrell & Morgan, cited in Krauss, 2005, p. 761). The approach strives to capture something that exists in the real world independently of the participants' and researchers' views and knowledge about it (Willig, 2012). Positivism asserts that a 'truth' exists, arguing the existence of a single objective external reality (Ponterotto, 2005). Post-positivism combines this with the acknowledgement that this reality can only be captured and measured imperfectly (Ponterotto, 2005). Although this approach may be seen by positivists as attending to the demand for 'scientific evidence', the phenomenological and humanistic philosophical underpinnings of counselling psychology research and practice seem incongruent with a positivist approach. Furthermore, this approach does not sit comfortably with my own philosophical position which I will discuss in more detail shortly.

From a feminist perspective, social science's adoption of positivism has been critiqued as displaying a bias towards the pathologization of women (Nicolson, 1995). In the 1960s and 1970s extensive critiques of 'male science' emerged including critiques of the 'male as norm' approach which highlighted that the majority of participants in research studies were male. Feminists highlighted that, in social scientific research, women had been largely overlooked and the few studies looking at women had often drawn conclusions regarding their inferiority to men. Such research was then used to perpetuate and justify existing societal inequalities between men and women. Feminists have also critiqued claims that scientific enquiry is objective arguing that the decisions regarding what will and what will not be measured and the process for doing so are made by researchers who thus inexorably shape the process and findings of research (Prince & Hartnett, 1993). As such, feminists have argued the impossibility of researchers positioning themselves as external to the study given the inevitability of their implication in, or relationship with, the subject being studied. Attempts to pretend that this is not the case have been termed 'God's eye view' (Haraway, 1988). Alternatively, individuals may engage with a reflexive approach by considering their own position with regards to the subject they are researching and by doing so, gain an understanding and awareness of the influence that they may have in shaping the research process and findings. The importance of engaging in such reflexivity, particularly in relation to the methodology of the current study, will be further discussed later in this chapter.

Social constructionism lies at the other end of the continuum and proposes a constructed lived experience, mediated by power relations within social and historical contexts (Ponterotto, 2005). The social constructionist approach assumes that multiple realities exist and thus values subjectivity, whilst also maintaining a focus on social justice and ending oppression. Social constructionism seems to be an approach with particular

relevance to feminist psychology given its focus on identifying and challenging the societal structures and values that particularly relate to, and impact, women (Nicolson, 1995).

My epistemological position may be described as phenomenological; a position that lies somewhere between the positivist and social constructionist positions. I believe that there is no single objective reality and that phenomena cannot be captured, and do not exist in the world, independently of the views and knowledge that are held about them. Instead, I believe that there is more than one world which can be studied because what appears to be the same event can be experienced in many different ways, meaning that there are potentially as many experiential worlds as there are individuals. This seems in line with a relativist ontology.

This approach provides the basis for the current research and seems consistent with the phenomenological roots of counselling psychology which underpin a relational and subjective approach, focusing upon meaning making, understanding and processing (M. Cooper, 2009). In terms of the current study, although the participants have a shared experience of a male partner who has used pornography, they may have experienced this in many different ways depending on their meaning-making, amongst other factors, thus highlighting the value of producing knowledge about the subjective experiences of females whose male partners use pornography.

Within a phenomenological stance, tensions arise between the varying positions along the continuum. Whereas a descriptive phenomenological approach is interested in capturing experience "precisely as it presents itself, neither adding nor subtracting from it" (Giorgi, 1997, p. 121), an interpretative phenomenological approach does not accept accounts of experience at face value (Willig, 2013). Instead, it attempts to also understand the meaning of a recounted experience by stepping outside the account and reflecting upon its status in relation to the wider social, cultural, psychological and theoretical context

(Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). Firstly, I would agree with Van Manen (2016) who argues that all description inevitably requires a form of interpretation. Furthermore, perhaps a reflection of my training as a counselling psychologist, I place value on understanding people within their context as opposed to seeing them as isolated individuals; as such, it felt that a descriptive phenomenological approach would not provide the depth of understanding that an interpretative phenomenological stance would in seeking to uncover more than a description of the experience itself. An interpretative phenomenological stance seems representative of my own philosophical position, as well as being congruent with the philosophical underpinnings of counselling psychology which prioritizes subjectivity and inter-subjectivity, and a focus on individuals as socially and relationally embedded (M. Cooper, 2009).

Morrow (2007) suggests that assuming that a study fits neatly into a single paradigm is a simplistic view. This would seem true of the current study which inevitably also seems to encompass elements of social constructionist thinking given the feminist underpinning and desire for social justice for female partners of male porn users. Nevertheless, the focus remains phenomenological in line with my own position and approach to this research.

*In considering my epistemological and ontological views as a counselling psychologist researcher, I have also reflected on my identity as a counselling psychologist practitioner. I initially struggled to see how they had any relevance; however, through understanding my epistemological position as a researcher as phenomenological, I realized that this mirrored my position as a practitioner. In my practice, I am interested in the subjective experiences of my clients – allowing me to understand what things are like for them as an individual.*

*Having recognized the overlap, I also identified some variations between my roles as a researcher and practitioner. Within my practice, although my own understanding develops simultaneously, the focus is on helping clients to develop their understanding of themselves and their experiences in order to facilitate change. However, during the research interviews, my focus was on ensuring my own understanding through gathering information.*

## Choosing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Among the methodologies considered for this research, IPA stood out as the most appropriate given its focus on lived experience. Before choosing IPA, alternative methodologies were considered. Narrative analysis (NA) is an umbrella term covering a range of methods and theoretical orientations which, in its simplest form, is aimed at understanding life as a constructed story (Rappaport, 1993). Although this could provide interesting insight into the narratives of the female partners, because the current research is not concerned with the construction of stories, but more with meaning making and subjective experience, this approach was discarded. Thematic analysis was also considered due to its epistemological flexibility and its concern with capturing and making sense of the meanings that characterize the phenomenon under investigation (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Joffe, 2012). However, the congruence between the epistemological stance underpinning the current research, and the philosophical underpinnings of IPA, as well as the relevance of those to counselling psychology, made IPA the more suitable approach.

### Theoretical Underpinnings of IPA

IPA aims to explore how participants make sense of their personal and social worlds, and the meanings that particular experiences and events hold for them (Smith et al., 2009). The underpinnings of IPA focus on three key areas: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith et al., 2009). In attending to the subjective experiences of female

partners, the study pursues an idiographic commitment which operates at two levels: firstly, a commitment to the detail of the unique individual, and therefore the depth of analysis; and secondly, a commitment to understanding how individual experiential phenomena, such as events, processes or relationships, have been understood from the perspective of particular people, in their particular context (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). This attends to Cooper's (2009) fifth and sixth counselling psychology principles: "an appreciation of the client as a unique being", and "an understanding of the client as a socially and relationally-embedded being" (p. 120).

Phenomenology originated from the work of Husserl (1931) who established the importance and relevance of a focus on experience. Heidegger (1962) developed this further emphasising that people do not live in isolation; rather they exist and need to be understood within context. He moved away from Husserl's descriptive position towards one with an interpretative commitment aimed at understanding the complexity of 'experience'. This involved attending to a lived process, and unfolding the perspectives and meanings unique to the individuals within their relationship to the world, rather than as isolated individuals. In line with this, IPA is concerned with gaining an understanding of people's subjective experiences within particular contexts and times. As mentioned above, this fits with my own philosophical position and is particularly suited to the research questions of the current study which focused on gaining an understanding of the subjective experiences and meaning making of female partners of male pornography users.

However, acknowledging the potential for variation in experiences still does not mean that these subjective experiences can be captured without influence from the fore-conceptions of both participants and researchers. Although we may attempt to follow sound procedures in order to capture experiences as accurately and fully as possible, I believe that we must acknowledge the co-construction taking place between the participant and

researcher. This view is perhaps reflective of a hermeneutic emphasis which, moving away from a Husserlian approach towards a Heideggerian approach, posits that all description embodies a form of interpretation. Therefore, IPA accepts the impossibility of directly accessing the life-worlds of research participants and acknowledges that through this type of exploration, the researcher's view of the world, and the nature of the interaction between the researcher and participant, will inevitably be implicated (Willig, 2013). A two-stage, or double hermeneutic, interpretation process is therefore involved; "as participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world" (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p.51). This hermeneutic aspect enables the study to go further than simply describing experience, to understanding the experiences within a social, historical, and theoretical context.

Although a Husserlian approach posits that researchers should attempt to 'bracket off' their own beliefs and assumptions in order to prevent their influence on data collection and analysis; I wonder if this is ever possible. Instead, a seemingly more realistic approach is that of Heidegger which explores the relationship between our fore-understanding and interpretative work, highlighting bracketing as only partially achievable. With this in mind, reflexivity played an integral part throughout this research in understanding the relationship between fore-understanding and the interpretative work taking place (Finlay & Gough, 2003).

**Limitations of IPA**

Critics of IPA contend that the researcher is playing an active role, required as they are to make sense of the data collected. In identifying themes, researchers should be monitoring themselves and their own subjectivity (Finlay, 2012); this was attended to in the current research through reflexivity. It is also argued that IPA relies upon the representational adequacy of language in presupposing that this provides participants with

sufficient tools for capturing their experience (Willig, 2013). Heidegger (1962) describes language as 'the house of Being'; whilst he suggests that language inevitably both shapes and limits interpretations of lived experience, he also posits that language enables such interpretations. In discussing embodiment, Merleau-Ponty (1962) suggests that, although we may observe and empathize with another, ultimately it is impossible to entirely capture their lived experience due to its enmeshment with their embodied position. However, I believe that regardless of the inevitability of language shaping experience, and the impossibility of fully understanding another's experience of being a body in the world, we must not overlook or ignore lived experience.

## Participants

### Recruitment

The participants were recruited through a variety of sources. A significant amount of internet searching revealed a few specialist organizations and individuals providing support for partners of porn users. E-mails were sent and one independent organization providing individual and group support to both porn users and their partners agreed to circulate the invitation letter to the females with whom they had worked. Following this, three females got in touch, one followed through with the research process. Subsequently, organizations providing general relationship counselling were contacted. Many did not respond and those who did said they were unwilling to advertise the research. Meanwhile, a second participant came forward having heard about the research through word of mouth.

I began to realize that I had focused my search too narrowly and that potential participants could be anyone; they were not solely going to be people attending therapy centres. As such, I began to reflect on other sources of recruitment in order to widen my search. I put up a research poster at a university campus (see appendix 2), one female responded and she became the third participant.

*In what was beginning to feel like a relentless task, I began to wonder if I had chosen an inaccessible topic, and if I would ever get participants. At a university research consultation group, I shared my frustrations about these difficulties. It was very normalizing to hear that others were also having recruitment difficulties. The group made some useful suggestions and helped renew my motivation keep going.*

The suggestion from the group was to go on general forums such as mumsnet.com to seek out conversation threads with women talking about their partners' pornography use. A message was posted about the research, asking anyone who may be interested to get in touch. Although a few women got in touch, none of them followed through with the research process. A Facebook page advertising the research was created and gained some views, but again, no participants came forward.

Finally, a Facebook search turned up a support group for female partners of male porn users, a request to join the group was sent and, once accepted, a message was sent to the three group administrators asking for permission to post a message in the group about the research. They gave their permission and in addition, all three of them said they would be happy to participate. These three, as well as a further four women who got in touch, did not participate in the research. I also received lengthy Facebook messages from two women sharing their experiences but they did not wish to be interviewed, reporting that it was too shameful and because they did not want their partners to find out. However, three further contacts through the group did follow through with interviews and became the fourth, fifth and sixth participants.

*From the recruitment process, there seemed to be a tension for potential participants between wanting and not wanting to engage, highlighted by those who got in touch but chose not to partake. It seems that the difficulty in recruitment is worth reflecting on as it perhaps already begins to give an insight into the hushed and sensitive nature of*

*this topic, perhaps highlighting the social stigma and shame felt by female partners which has been reported in previous research. This is perhaps an opportunity to also acknowledge my own discomfort at times with having to tell people about my research topic due to a fear about how they may react, what they might think of me, and the possibility that they may not be comfortable with talking about a topic of this sensitive nature.*

**Inclusion Criteria**

In order to gain a purposive and homogeneous sample (Smith et al., 2009), the sampling criteria required that participants were female, aged 18 or above, and had been in a co-habiting heterosexual relationship for a minimum of one year with a male partner engaged in pornography use. The literature suggests that the majority of those seeking support with regards to their partner's porn use are married females (Tripodi, 2006) and thus the current research focused on male porn users and female partners in order to maintain relevance and add to the existing literature. Furthermore, existing tendencies to pathologize female partners highlighted a need for research which moves away from a medical model, towards one of understanding subjective experience. Due to the anticipated difficulties with recruitment, there were no criteria regarding whether or not the couple were married or had children as this could limit an already difficult to reach group of people. However, research reports that "the length of time in the relationship appears to moderate the effects of pornography, as women who reported being in longer committed relationships were more affected by their partner's pornography use (Perry, 2016). As such, in wanting to gain as homogeneous a sample as possible, it was deemed important to attend to the duration of the relationship. In wanting to ensure that the research was focusing on committed relationships without limiting the sample too much, a criteria requiring a minimum time of one year in the relationship was implemented. The criteria regarding co-habitation reflected the possibility that a female partner's experience may differ depending

on whether or not she were living with her partner. Although previous research specific to female partners seemed not to have included any criteria regarding relationship duration or living arrangements, the inclusion criteria of the current study reflected other relationship research where participants were required to have been in a cohabiting relationship for a minimum of one year (e.g. Johnson & Greenberg, 1985; Purnine & Carey, 1997).

There were no criteria regarding the duration or frequency of the pornography use due to firstly, the study's lack of interest in defining 'normal' and 'problematic' porn use, and secondly the possibility that the female partners may not have an accurate idea of their partner's porn use. There were no criteria regarding the male partner having a 'diagnosis' (such as pornography addiction) as, firstly, no such diagnosis exists in the DSM-V; and secondly, the focus of the research is on the female's experience regardless of the male's behaviour. Furthermore, my own view is that a diagnosis is not necessary in order for an experience to be valid.

**A Note about Language and Terminology**

It seems important to note that any use of the terms 'pornography addiction' and 'sex addiction' in the current study are a reflection of the language used either in the existing literature, or by the participants. The current research does not claim to, and has no interest in, determining whether or not the male partners were 'pornography/sex addicts'. One of the quotes presented in the analysis chapter is of a sexually violent nature which may be distressing to some people. This quote will be preceded by a note to the reader. Some quotes contain swearing.

**The Sample**

In line with IPA's idiographic commitment, only a small sample was required (Smith et al., 2009). Although considered a limitation by some, IPA's small sample size works to produce rich data, facilitating an understanding of the specific experience from the

perspective of the individual experiencing it. Smith et al. (2009) suggest between four and ten interviews are sufficient for professional doctorate research as successful analysis requires time and reflection which tend to be inhibited by larger datasets. Six females were recruited for the study with ages ranging from 30 to 60. Table 1 provides demographic information about the participants.

*Although I was initially concerned by the difficulty with recruitment, when completing the analysis, I was satisfied that the six interviews had generated rich enough data to work with. At times the data felt so rich that the organizing of it into themes felt overwhelming.*

Table 1

*Demographics of participants*

| Name | Age | Ethnicity | Duration of relationship | Still in the relationship? | Therapeutic work specifically related to this experience | Interview method |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Julie | 60 | White British | 25 years | No | Intensive four-day group | Face to face |
| Hannah | 36 | White British | 8.5 years | Yes | None | Face to face |
| Sophia | 30 | White Other | 2 years | No | None | Face to face |
| Melissa | 43 | White American | 16 years | Yes | None | Skype |
| Jade | 37 | White British | 10 years | Yes | Couple's therapy | Face to face |
| Carrie | 40 | White American | 11years | Yes | Ongoing group and individual | Skype |

*I had concerns regarding the homogeneity of the sample considering the varying ages and duration of the relationships, as well as the differing ethnicities of the participants*

*which could potentially bring differences between attitudes, values and culture. However, the data and existing literature suggested significant overlap between experiences in the UK and the USA.*

**Procedure and Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the University of East London (see appendix 3). Once participants had expressed an interest, they were sent an information letter outlining the purpose of the study, what participation would involve, and contact information for the researcher and the director of studies (see appendix 4). The information letter highlighted the possible risks and benefits of participating. Due to the sensitive nature of the research topic, and the possibility that sharing their story may cause some distress, participants were encouraged to discuss their decision to partake with a close friend or relative in order to receive support.

*With hindsight, I recognize my assumption that the participants would have someone from whom to seek support; I did not consider that they may not have told anyone about their experience. Although I did not ask explicitly, from speaking to the women, I would hypothesize that three of them would not have had anyone to discuss this with, and in fact, were careful to schedule interviews for times when their husbands were not around and therefore would not know they were participating. Julie[7] told me that she was discouraged from taking part by her family and friends as they feared it would be distressing for her. Hannah was asked not to participate by her husband because of his shame and embarrassment at others knowing. It is interesting to note that both Julie and Hannah still went ahead and participated regardless of the discouragement from those*

[7] In accordance with guidelines on ethics and conduct, participants' names and other significant identifying information has been changed in order to protect their anonymity (BPS, 2009).

*around them – reflections on motivations for participating, and the impact that this may have had on the findings, will be explored in the discussion (Chapter Four).*

The participants were made aware of their right to withdraw at any time and informed that interviews would be audio-recorded and transcribed with all identifying information removed. A lot of thought was given to how I would refer to the male partners' behaviour during recruitment and the interview process. In order to maintain neutrality and allow for a range of experiences, 'pornography use' was selected. It was hoped that by doing so, the data might capture a fuller picture of the women's experiences whether positive or negative. Furthermore, this seemed in line with counselling psychology's focus on facilitating growth as opposed to focusing on pathology (M. Cooper, 2009).

*A significant factor for me in choosing counselling psychology was its move away from pathology, towards well-being (Woolfe et al., 2010); perhaps for this reason, the terminology employed in previous research did not sit well with me, and I therefore gave this strong consideration. What I originally termed pornography addiction, changed to heavy pornography use, then to problematic pornography use; and finally pornography use, preferring not to label it. This was reflected in the change made to the thesis title (see Appendix 1).*

After participants had opted in to the research process, the interview time and location was discussed via e-mail. In most cases, this was a room at the university; however two of the interviews took place via Skype as the participants were in the USA. At interview, I ensured that participants had read and understood the information sheet and gave an opportunity for them to ask questions. A consent form was given to the participants

to read and sign if they were happy to participate[8] (see appendix 5). The participants gave brief demographic details to the researcher including their age, and the start and (if applicable) end of the relationship. Interviews lasted between 58 and 109 minutes and were audio recorded with participants' permission.

In considering the implications of conducting interviews both face-to-face and through Skype, Berg (2004) suggests that although not identical, these mediums share many similarities, especially with regards to semi-structured interviews. Although some argue that face-to-face interviews facilitate a more effective development of rapport (Fontana & Frey, 2009), others have argued that there is little evidence to suggest that Skype significantly reduces rapport building (Bryman, 2015). Furthermore, Skype perhaps provided an element of anonymity which may have rendered participants more willing to talk, especially given the highly sensitive nature of the topic (Lyons, 2014).

*I was initially concerned it would be difficult to develop a rapport with participants over Skype, and that this would limit my ability to gather in-depth data about the participants' subjective experiences. However, on completion I found that the Skype interviews provided equally in-depth accounts, if not more so. I wonder if the more anonymous nature of the Skype interaction, as well as these participants being in a different country, contributed to them engaging in a freer interaction.*

**Potential distress.** There was a risk that participation may cause distress, especially given the emotionally-charged and particularly sensitive nature of this topic. At the start of each interview, the importance of the participants' well-being was highlighted, and participants were made aware that they could take a break or end the interview at any time, and that they need not answer any questions that they did not wish to. Guided by my

[8] Participants interviewed using Skype completed and signed the consent form electronically and returned it by e-mail.

experience of working with people in distress, I strove to conduct the interviews in as sensitive a manner as possible. When participants displayed signs of distress or discomfort, they were reminded that they could take a break or terminate the interview. None of the participants took up this offer but I was mindful to be particularly empathic and gentle in these moments, and would frequently check in with the participant throughout the rest of the interview. Time was made at the end of interviews for a debrief, allowing participants to ask any questions and discuss their experience of the research process. Participants were also offered information regarding the support available and told how to get in touch with me should they experience any distress following their participation.

*One of the ethical challenges that I had not anticipated was the disclosure of a domestically abusive relationship including non-consensual couple sex. Given my concern for the participant, I found it imperative to discuss with her the availability of support. The participant informed me that she had already shared this with her GP and had been in touch with local charities offering support to women in abusive relationships. She was also already aware of the organizations and resources available in relation to her partner's use of pornography. With hindsight I recognize that, had this participant been based in the USA, I would have been less informed regarding how to signpost. As such, in future research, knowledge prior to the interview regarding where participants are based would allow the researcher the opportunity to gather information regarding local support, should signposting be required.*

*I had also not considered the information that participants might share about the content of the pornography, as such, disclosures regarding 'extreme' pornography were unexpected. Future researchers may benefit from preparing for disclosures extending beyond porn use, as well as the possibility of disclosures regarding 'extreme', or even illegal, forms of pornography and how to address these.*

## Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. As suggested by Smith et al. (2009), at the start of the interviews, participants were told that the researcher was interested in them and their experiences, and that there were no right or wrong answers. They were also told that the interview would be rather like a one-sided conversation and that some of the questions may seem self-evident but that this was because as the interviewer, I was trying to understand their experience and not wanting to make any assumptions (see appendix 6). The hope was that this would provide transparency and attend to the counselling psychology value of developing a non-hierarchical participant-researcher relationship (M. Cooper, 2009).

The interviews were guided by an interview schedule (see appendix 7) which comprised a list of open ended questions with some prompts, as suggested by Smith et al. (2009). However, the interviews were participant led, and priority was given to following curiosity rather than focusing on asking the next question. This was aimed at maintaining both counselling psychology's value of prioritising the participant's subjective experience (Kasket, 2012), as well as IPA's idiographic commitment (Smith et al., 2009). The questions invited participants to reflect on their meaning-making of their partner's pornography use, and their experience more generally. Participants were also asked to share their thoughts on seeking professional support in this area, including what they would hope to gain from seeking professional help; or for those who had already sought professional help, what their experience of this had been.

While developing the interview schedule, I was mindful that choosing IPA does not automatically achieve prioritization of the participant's experience (Kasket, 2012). Previous researchers in this area have acknowledged that their limited samples tended to elicit discussion of negative experiences (e.g. Cavaglion & Rashty, 2010; Schneider, 2000).

Acknowledging that there was a possibility of the current research following a similar path, a conscious effort was made to address this through the wording of the interview schedule, ensuring that participants were not led to talk only about their negative experiences. Perhaps they did not always experience their partner's pornography use as negative or problematic; for example, watching pornography may have been a shared or positive experience at some point in the relationship.

*It seems important to reflect on the influence that the existing literature may have had on my assumptions. For example, I initially took an unquestioning approach to the existing literature and thus developed the assumption that porn use in heterosexual relationships could only be negative. Having recognized this assumption, I worked to remove this bias from my own research, making a conscious effort to ensure that the language remained open and neutral, encouraging all experiences to be shared. On a more general note, I have noticed that this research process has encouraged me to take a critical lens, not only in terms of research but also in my clinical practice, applying this to therapeutic approaches for example.*

The interview schedule was developed to facilitate dialogue, but not direct or guide narratives. It supported the development of rapport between the interviewer and the participant allowing space for the participants to share their stories. One such way of achieving this was by beginning the interview with an open and broad question about their relationship in order to help the participants feel comfortable with the process before introducing more focused questions about their experiences. I adopted a facilitative and open style, whilst offering sufficient interaction when necessary, and avoiding interruptions. The open nature of both the questions and the interview style encouraged the emergence of participants' voices. This was further facilitated by the flexibility in employing the interview schedule; the questions were seldom asked in order as it felt more important to

maintain fluidity and remain participant led. As such, the participants often spoke at great length without the need for prompts allowing for their in-depth narratives from which themes could be drawn (see appendix 8 for a transcript extract).

*With most of the participants this seemed a successful way of opening the interview as they seemed comfortable talking about their relationship. However, for two of the participants it seems that the initial question was too open and they appeared unsure of where to start; I had prepared for this by having more specific prompts ready should they be required.*

*Given the interactive nature of a research interview, it felt important to reflect on my role as the interviewer and the impact I may have had on the interviews. At times I found it a struggle managing the tension between my role as a researcher, and my training as a practitioner – this was particularly challenging when wanting to communicate empathy. On multiple occasions I had to actively prevent myself sharing my own sense of their difficult experiences, not wanting to influence their responses. Rather than saying "it sounds like that was really difficult for you", as I might have been tempted, I focused on my role as an information gatherer. In anticipation of this challenge, I had conducted a practice interview with a colleague to work on how I could respond to participants without taking a 'therapeutic' role.*

*Although I had introduced the participants to the interview, informing them of the one-sided nature of our interaction, I found myself wanting to protect the participants from feeling as though they were being bombarded with questions and as such, from time to time, I provided responses that were perhaps more therapeutic in nature. My intention in doing so was to show the participants that I was listening, and to contribute to the development of rapport. For me personally, it felt unfair to ask these women to share their very personal experiences with me, and for my only response to be another question. Having said that, I*

*was mindful to ensure that my responses were demonstrative of my active listening, but not guiding. For example, with Melissa I used summarizing:*

> *P: I had actually got to a point where I told him, before the physical affair thing, 'I can do this, you know, I can forgive you for this, we can work through it, erm I've learned already a lot and erm, I know about the ego and things like that so let's, we can do this'*
>
> *I: OK, so at the point you felt like you could get through it*
>
> *P: Mhmm...Yep*

In order to ensure reflexivity, a research journal was kept throughout data collection. This was used as a space to record initial thoughts, reflections and feelings to be returned to and acknowledged throughout the research process. This attended to the concept of 'bracketing off' these initial thoughts (Husserl, 1931) although I deemed it impossible to achieve this in full. Rather, it increased my awareness, allowing me to reflect on what this might tell me about my position, and how this may influence and impact my approach to the research.

*Given the challenge in recruiting participants, I was surprised that during the interviews, participants seemed so open and forthcoming with their stories; at times, to an almost overwhelming point. In the post interview notes from one participant I wrote: "It felt like I was just getting this flood of information, like she was vomiting it all at me. It also seemed very jumbled and I kept having to take her back to things she'd said in order to make sense of them." I wondered if this related to the fact that, for some of the participants, the interview was one of their first opportunities to talk about their experiences and thus, the jumbled accounts reflected their lack of previous opportunity to work through and process their experiences and emotions.*

## Data Analysis

Data analysis did not begin until all interviews had been conducted and transcribed in order to limit the influence on subsequent interviews. I transcribed each interview myself

and used this as an opportunity to immerse myself in the data. Smith et al. (2009) provide step-by-step guidance on the processes and strategies for analyzing data, and for organizing and developing that analysis. In line with IPA's idiographic commitment, each transcript was individually analysed in depth. This first stage of analysis entailed reading and re-reading the data; a process that ensured that the participant became the focus of the analysis, and assisted with entering the participant's world. Each transcript was read several times both with and without the audio recording. The audio recordings enabled further perspective to be gained through tone of voice, emphasis, hesitation, etc.

*As suggested by Smith and colleagues (2009), I used my reflexive journal to note my initial, and most striking, thoughts and observations. I felt overwhelmed by the amount and richness of the data; and recording these thoughts helped me reduce the level of this 'noise'. This allowed me to remain focused on the data.*

This was followed by hand written initial commentary in the left-hand margins of the transcripts, including descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual observations (Smith et al., 2009).

*It felt exciting that the analysis was getting underway and I was eager to get a better sense of the data. I became increasingly aware of my own expectations and the ways in which these were both being met and challenged. I used my reflexive journal to record the parts that I found surprising and any expectations that I realized I held (see appendix 9). This allowed me to be more mindful of my assumptions and expectations in order to not simply search the transcripts for data that supported my expectations, but rather to embrace the aspects that were surprising to me, allowing me to maintain a true focus on the participants' experiences.*

From the initial notes, 'emergent themes' were developed in the right-hand margin of each transcript. This involved creating and refining concise phrases capturing the salient points in the exploratory comments.

*This phase was a struggle. My desire to accurately and adequately capture the participants' accounts of their experiences, and to 'do the research justice', meant that I found it very difficult to, firstly, organize the data into themes, and secondly, reduce the amount of themes into a manageable number. Smith et al. (2009) acknowledge the discomfort that researchers may feel about "seeming to fragment participants' experiences through this re-organization of the data" (p. 91). I had to frequently remind myself that this process is to be expected as a manifestation of the hermeneutic circle. I also found it difficult to put myself in a more central role when organizing and interpreting the data, and keep in mind the importance of both the 'I' and the 'P' in IPA.*

*It seems important to note that although Smith et al. (2009), refer to 'emergent themes', this seems misrepresentative of the process by which themes are developed. I believe that themes do not emerge of their own accord; they are identified by the researcher. In my opinion, the phrase 'identifying themes' better represents the process by which the themes are developed, and recognizes the role of the researcher in this process.*

The next phase involved looking for connections and patterns across cases in order to identify recurring themes. This was mainly achieved through 'abstraction', which involved putting like with like and developing higher-level themes (Smith et al., 2009). I wrote each theme on a post-it note and moved them around in order to explore a visual representation of the relationships between the themes, with the themes presenting parallel or similar insights being placed together. In order to progress local analysis, transcript extracts were compiled to make tables of the identified themes, highlighting the internal consistency, and the generality or specificity of each theme (Smith et al., 2009). It felt

important to identify superordinate and subordinate themes for each individual interview in order to truly attend to subjectivity. An alternative approach, where superordinate and subordinate themes are identified across all interviews following initial analysis (phases one to three), seemed too generalized an approach; however, Smith et al. (2009) note that that this second approach may reduce the possible bias that may lead one to try and 'fit' subsequent participants into the existing themes from completed analyses.

Attention was paid to IPA's analytic commitment by ensuring that the themes captured more than a descriptive list of topics mentioned by participants. In order to ensure that the theme clusters made sense in relation to the original data, I moved back and forth between the list of themes and the data that generated the themes in the first place. This involved a process of 'zooming in and out' of the data, ensuring that the connections between themes were a reflection of the participants' accounts (Willig, 2013). Appendix 10 provides an example paper trail showing the process of analysis for one participant.

The next stage involved repeating the process with each subsequent transcript. Smith and Osborn (2007) suggest two options, either using the themes from the first interview to help guide subsequent analysis, or putting aside the themes from the first analysis to work on transcript two without preconceptions. In order to attend to each participant's subjectivity and individuality, it seemed important to treat the next case in its own terms. In keeping with IPA's idiographic commitment, this involved attempting to bracket the ideas from the analysis of previous participants as much as possible, in order to increase the likelihood of both discerning repeating patterns whilst also acknowledging new issues emerging from each transcript (Smith & Osborn, 2007, p. 73).

*Initially I was concerned about my ability to bracket off previously identified themes, however, I was surprised to find that there was enough individuality in the participants' accounts that it was not too difficult to look at each transcript in its own right.*

The next step involved laying out the tables of local analysis in order to identify connections across the cases and the themes that seemed most prominent, as well as some of the unique experiences. Similarly to the process employed for local analysis, post-it notes were used to help cluster the recurring themes and identify the master themes that captured the quality of the participants' shared experience. The themes were changed, refined and re-clustered multiple times; Appendix 11 shows the development of the themes. From this, a list of master themes and subthemes was created, together with identifiers indicating which of the participants had invoked them (see appendix 12). Appendix 13 provides a table of illustrative quotes for each theme.

*Throughout the analytic process I was mindful of wanting to ensure that I was conducting the analysis in a sound manner. In order to enhance my research skills I referred to IPA literature and attended an IPA group. I was anxious to ensure that my themes were representative of the data; as such I presented them to research support groups, peers, and regularly consulted with my research supervisor.*

*During interviews and analysis, I made a decision to move away from the existing literature and focus on my own data in order to prevent the existing literature from having further influence on the findings of the current research. Having completed the analysis I began to re-engage with the literature and was left with little doubt that maintaining a distance had been the right thing to do. On looking at the findings from previous research, I instantly began to think "I don't have that as one of my themes, I need to add it". I had to take a step back and reflect on what was happening and trust that my analysis and themes captured the experiences of my participants.*

## Validity and Quality

There is now considerable discourse amongst qualitative researchers with regards to assessing the validity and quality of qualitative research. The differing epistemologies of

quantitative and qualitative approaches mean that the criteria traditionally used in assessing the scientific value of quantitative research in psychology (e.g. reliability, representativeness, generalisability, objectivity) cannot be meaningfully applied to qualitative research (Willig, 2013). This growing dissatisfaction has prompted the development of a number of guidelines for assessing quality or validity in qualitative research (e.g. Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999; Yardley, 2000). As Smith et al. (2009) focus on Yardley's (2000) guidelines as a way of assessing IPA, the current study will be evaluated against Yardley's (2000) four principles: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance. These will be discussed in Chapter Four (Discussion).

## Reflexivity

It is now widely accepted that reflexivity has a firm place within qualitative research as it encourages acknowledgement of the ways in which the researcher is a central figure through their role in the collection and interpretation of data (Finlay, 2002). This is particularly important in an IPA study where there is an explicitly acknowledged, and a necessary level of, interpretation. However, Kasket and Gil-Rodriguez (2011) suggest that many trainee counselling psychologists fall into 'The Invisible Researcher Trap' where the "person of the researcher is entirely absent from the document" (p. 26). Kasket (2012) proposes that there are three types of reflexivity that are essential to a doctoral thesis – personal, methodological, and epistemological. As such, throughout the research process a reflexive position has been maintained through the use of a reflexive journal, research consultation groups, and discussions with colleagues and my director of studies.

*It has felt both challenging and enlightening to maintain reflexivity throughout the research process. In addition to the traditional format for academic research writing which does not readily lend itself to the inclusion of reflexivity (Kasket & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011),*

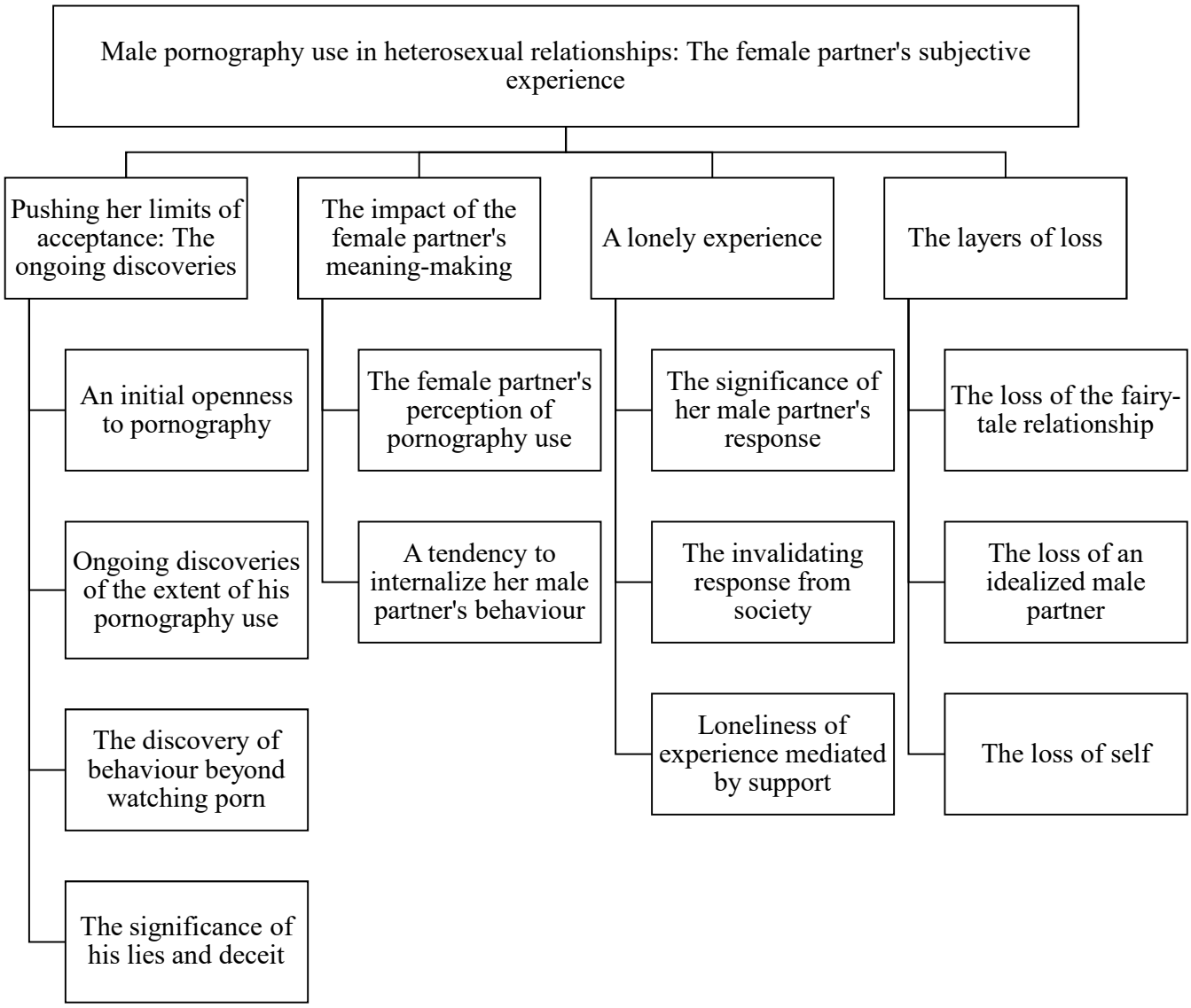
*throughout the majority of my academic journey, I have been discouraged from writing in the first person. It therefore took time for me to feel comfortable using the word 'I' as part of this project. Furthermore, the task of being reflexive in itself was a challenge. I felt that it took a great deal of contemplation to identify, for example, my own assumptions and expectations (and their impact), and why I had been drawn to this research. Research consultation groups and discussions with peers were a definite contributor in facilitating this process. Having persisted, I feel that I have a significantly greater awareness of myself, and what I am bringing to this research that might have been different if it were someone else doing it.*

# CHAPTER THREE
# ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the themes identified through the interpretative phenomenological analysis of six semi-structured interviews, exploring the lived experiences of females who have been in relationships with a male partner who watches pornography. 12 subordinate themes were identified and clustered to form four master themes (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

*Master themes and subthemes*



## Introduction to the Themes

The four master themes provide an interpretative account of the participants' understanding and experiences of their male partners' pornography use. Although the master themes were common to the six participants, attention has also been paid to the range of the participants' experiences. Consequently, areas of difference and divergence will also be discussed throughout the analysis.

The first master theme highlights and explores the way in which participants' ongoing discoveries regarding their male partner's behaviour, increasingly push her towards the limits of what she is willing to accept. The participants' initial discovery of their male partner's use of pornography was often met with openness from the female partners, demonstrated through their willingness to watch pornography with their male partners. However, each new discovery – of "pornography addiction" or offline behaviour, for example – seemed to increasingly challenge the female partners' limits of acceptance.

The second master theme attends to the meaning-making of the female partners, focusing on two areas. Firstly, the meaning they attach to pornography use, and the impact of this on their lived experience. For example, many share their negative associations with pornography use such as it being "disgusting" and "dirty", and a form of "cheating". Secondly, the female partner's meaning-making about herself is explored. The majority of the participants describe a tendency to internalize their male partner's behaviour, believing it to be indicative of some flaw or inadequacy in themselves.

The third master theme explores the various aspects that contribute to the loneliness of this experience; namely, the invalidating and dismissive responses that the female partners receive from both their male partners and from society when they attempt to express their distress. In addition to addressing the difficulty with accessing support

reported by some, there is also discussion of the significant benefits reported by those who were able to seek and receive support.

The fourth and final master theme explores loss. For many of the participants, their experience of their male partner's pornography use results in the loss of what they considered to be a fairy-tale relationship. Similarly, the female partners often give somewhat idealized descriptions of their male partners and thus, there is also a sense that they have lost their idealized male partner. The participants also describe a loss of themselves as a result of this experience.

**Master Theme 1 – Pushing Her Limits of Acceptance: The Ongoing Discoveries**

The majority of the participants describe their ongoing discoveries of their male partners' behaviours. Many of them report an initial openness to pornography, including offering to watch pornography with their male partner. However, as the discoveries continue and the female partners realize the extent of their male partners' porn use, they describe their shock and devastation. Having overcome the initial shock, the female partners often share a sense of hope that the couple can work through the difficulties and that the relationship can survive. However, it seems that for all of the participants, there comes a point where her partners' behaviour goes beyond what she is willing to accept. This journey is explored through the following sub-themes: (1) An initial openness to pornography, (2) The ongoing discovery of the extent of his pornography use, (3) Male partner's behaviour beyond pornography use, and (4) The significance of his lies and deceit.

**Subordinate Theme – An Initial Openness to Pornography**

Four of the six participants describe an initial openness to pornography use as illustrated in these quotes from Carrie and Hannah:

> *"I'm not the girl who has major moral judgements about it. [5 second pause] I was never the girl who...was disgusted, or thought it was evil (Carrie, 456-459).*

> *"I was taking the piss out of him 'cause he'd been looking at porn...because it wasn't an issue, it really wasn't" (Hannah, 44-46).*

Hannah's account of her initial response to discovering her partner's porn use gives the sense of a laid-back attitude, supported by her somewhat jokey approach. Some participants described their suggestion of watching porn together, as illustrated by Sophia:

> *"I even told him, "listen, I have nothing against the porn, we can watch together, I don't mind" [...] But he would always be, "no, I don't want this, I don't want that"" (Sophia, 246-253).*

This quote seems to illustrate Sophia's initial openness to pornography, and perhaps her attempt to include herself in a part of her partner's life from which she felt excluded. This appears to have been unsuccessful as her male partners rejects her offer.

It seems that for Jade, watching porn began as a shared activity with her partner:

> *"in the early days in our relationship we watched porn together...there was a female producer called Anna Span or something [laughs] and we went and got one of her DVDs and watched it" (Jade, 418-422).*

Jade's language and tone throughout this quote seem to demonstrate her casual and open attitude towards pornography in the early days of her relationship. This may imply Jade's accepting attitude towards mutual pornography use.

In summary, for many of the participants, the discovery of their male partner's pornography use was not instantly an issue. In fact, many share an initial openness in their attitude to porn use and suggest watching porn with their partner.

*It felt particularly important to acknowledge that more than half of the participants described an initial openness to pornography use as this perhaps begins to address a limitation in the existing qualitative research which largely adopts a harm-focused approach. As was hoped by attending to the language throughout the recruitment and interview process (discussed in Chapter 3 - Methodology), it seems that the current study was, at least in part, successful in not leading the participants to only talk about their negative experiences and attitudes to pornography.*

**Subordinate Theme – Ongoing Discoveries of the Extent of His Pornography Use**

Having learnt that their partners were watching pornography, the next discovery often related to the extent of their partner's porn use. The participants describe the emotional turmoil that accompanies this discovery – labelled by some as 'pornography addiction' – particularly their shock and upset. However, having overcome the initial shock, it seems that the participants perceived this difficulty as surmountable, describing their hope of working through it together.

Hannah describes the shock of learning of her partner's "porn addiction":

> *"...he came in and he said "I'm sorry, I've got a porn addiction" he actually said those words, **that** I wasn't expecting **at all** [emboldened to reflect Hannah's emphasis] ...when he said "I have a porn addiction" he took the wind out of me" (Hannah, 150-154).*

Hannah's emphasis of "that" suggests that the content of the disclosure comes as a surprise; her stress on "at all" perhaps reinforces the unexpectedness of her partner's disclosure. In describing that "he took the wind out of [her]" it gives the sense of her not being able to breathe. Having learnt of her partner's "pornography addiction", Hannah's partner assured her that he was going to stop looking at porn. Hannah goes on to describe a second discovery when she realized the extent of his pornography use some months later:

> *"I got the laptop and I, I clicked to close erm, the recipe, and behind it was another screen open, with porn on it, and I was like "what the fuck". So I then went into the history and it showed, you know, every time he'd logged on and he, and it was months and months and months and months and months and [...] he'd been on it and on it and on it and on it, erm, and he, it was **every** day and the **stuff** [emboldened to reflect Hannah's emphasis], I mean it was very varied it was fucking disgusting, erm, but there was, there was so much" (Hannah, 289-300).*

It would seem that Hannah experiences a second shock on discovering that her partner has still been logging onto porn sites. Hannah's emphasis on "**every** day", and her repetition of "months" and "on it" give the sense that the frequency of his behaviour was significant and troubling for Hannah. Furthermore, Hannah's emphasis on "the **stuff**" and

her description of the porn being "very varied" and "fucking disgusting" gives an insight into Hannah's revulsion at the nature of what her partner was watching.

Despite her devastation at discovering her partner's porn addiction, Melissa describes her sense of hope for the relationship:

> *"I hated the fact that he was a porn addict, that I was finding that out, but, I thought there's hope, there's therapy, you know, he hasn't, he hasn't totally shattered the glass...There's a crack in it, but maybe we can repair it" (Melissa, 583-588).*

Melissa's description of "[hating] the fact that he was a porn addict", whilst simultaneously maintaining "hope" gives the sense of conflicting emotions. As such, it would seem that, although the discovery is initially shocking and devastating, his pornography use does not go beyond what Melissa is willing to accept in the relationship and thus she maintains hope. Melissa's likening of herself, her husband, and her relationship to glass stands out for me; it gives the sense of something fragile. Melissa's description of repairing the "crack" seems an interesting metaphor to use as there is little that can be done to repair cracked glass. As such, perhaps on some level, Melissa feels that the relationship can never fully recover.

To summarize, this sub-theme has explored the female partners' ongoing discoveries regarding the extent of their male partners' porn use. For some this involved learning of the frequency and content of their partner's porn use, for others, their partners disclosed 'pornography addiction'. Although many participants describe the shock and upset that accompanied these discoveries, the female partners also describe a willingness to work through these difficulties, and a hope that the relationship can be repaired.

**Subordinate Theme –The Discovery of Behaviour beyond Pornography Use**

Having discovered the frequency and content of their partner's porn use, the participants go on to share discoveries of behaviours which extended beyond watching porn. The female partners describe the difference for them between porn use, and behaviours

beyond watching porn which included both online behaviours (for example web or video chats, posting ads on websites, and emotional affairs) and offline behaviours (such as physical affairs and paying women for sex). It seems that some participants perceived porn as the gateway to other behaviours. This theme explores how, for many participants, discovering their partner's behaviour beyond watching porn pushed them to the limit of what they were willing to accept. Julie describes what it was like for her to discover her partner's offline behaviour:

> *"this feeling of despair and thinking well that's it, I I can't forgive this, you know, I knew really that was the end, erm because of the betrayal and erm the lies and the and the impact on me" (Julie, 513-516).*

> *"because of the women the other women he'd been with and you know some of his e-mails were very explicit about what he wanted to do to them and er...yeah I just felt repulsed and I thought you know, you just feel what you have with your partner is very special don't you and I felt that had just gone (Julie, 669-674).*

It seems that this discovery brought with it a range of emotions for Julie, accompanied by the realization that this meant the end of the relationship due to the betrayal, lies and impact on her. This suggests that his behaviour had reached the limits of her acceptance, perhaps also partly due to the loss of the 'specialness' of what one has with their partner. The impact of his betrayal will be further discussed in the next sub-theme, 'The significance of his lies and deceit'. Loss will also be revisited in Master theme four.

Sophia also describes discovering that her partner's behaviour extended beyond watching porn:

> *"...when I discovered that he was actually talking to someone as well, like probably it started online and then you know video chatting so I felt even worse because that for me is a real, a real cheating, because you are opening yourself for someone, even if there is no physical contact but I am just next door sleeping and you are here putting your willy out for someone you know to see it and it's just something that for me is very intimate and should be as a couple it should be you know, and not just for sharing" (Sophia, 357-364).*

Sophia shares how the intimate nature of her partner's behaviour violates her relationship values and expectations. She describes that, for her, this is "real cheating" because he is opening himself up to someone else. As such, it seems that similarly to Julie, there is a sense of betrayal here for Sophia. It also appears that Sophia attached significance to the fact that she was "just next door sleeping" and he chose to engage sexually with someone else – perhaps another violation of her relationship expectation that he should be choosing her.

To summarize, as part of their ongoing discoveries, some of the participants came to know of their male partner's behaviours beyond watching porn. It seems that with this, came an increased sense of betrayal which in Julie's case pushed her to her limit of acceptance and led to her ending the relationship. From the participants' accounts, it appears that these experiences were accompanied by a plethora of emotions; heartbreak, despair and anger, to name a few. It would seem that the emotions attached to these discoveries convey more hurt, whereas the earlier discoveries described in the previous sub-theme seemed to be accompanied by shock. The hope that was described in the previous subtheme is no longer mentioned.

**Subordinate Theme – The Significance of His Lies and Deceit**

Many of the participants share the significance of their partners' lies and deceit. Although many participants were eventually told by their male partner about his sexual behaviours, this was often preceded by extended periods of time where the female partners were kept in the dark – often despite repeated attempts to find out about their male partner's behaviour. Thus, the ongoing discoveries of the female partners described throughout this master theme were often accompanied by a discovery of lies and deceit; the impact of which will be explored in this sub-theme.

In discussing her experience of discovering her partner's deceit, Hannah shares her intolerance of lies:

> *"...it was more the lying, you know, if I, if I ask somebody a question and they lie to me I'm just, I, I can't cope with that" (Hannah, 180-182).*

In describing that "it was more the lying", Hannah seems to be saying that the lying was more of an issue for her than her partner's actual behaviour. Hannah goes on to share her view on the link between his secretive behaviour and the behaviour being an issue:

> *"I've got friends whose boyfriends or husbands or whatever look at a lot of porn but it's all accepted and, but they don't hide it. It was always hidden because I used to say that to Simon, if it's not an issue why are you hiding it from me? You know, leave it on the computer don't hide it" (Hannah, 421-426).*

It would seem that, for Hannah, her partner's tendency to hide his behaviour made it an issue. Hannah draws comparisons with her friend's partners who "look at a lot of porn" but do so openly. She seems to imply that their behaviour is accepted because they do not hide it, or perhaps that they do not hide it so it is accepted. Either way, their openness creates an accepting attitude to porn use which differs from the one in Hannah's relationship.

Carrie describes discovering that her partner had 'relapsed' and hidden it from her for six weeks. She reports the negative impact of her husband's secrecy:

> *"The kind of porn that he accessed during this relapse [...] was shocking. But it wouldn't have thrown me to the degree as the fact that he lied about it for so long" (Carrie, 782-788).*

It would seem that the "shock" that Carrie experienced from discovering his relapse and the type of porn that he had looked at was exacerbated by the fact that he kept it secret from her "for so long", making this all the more distressing for Carrie. Carrie describes the value she attaches to her partner's honesty:

> *"I've never asked him to not be a sex addict or a porn addict, I've never asked him to be perfect, I've never expected that he won't ever struggle, what I want and need is for him to be honest about it" (Carrie, 499-502).*

Carrie describes that all that she asks of her husband is that he is honest about his behaviour. In reporting that she has "never asked him to not be a sex addict or a porn addict," it would seem that these are things that Carrie can accept; however, it would appear that what she cannot accept is him lying about it.

In sum, it appears that the lies and deceit that the female partners experienced from their male partners were a significant contributor to their experience. It seems that there was a link between the male partner's honesty, and the female partner's acceptance. For some of the participants, Carrie for example, it seemed that her partner's dishonesty and secrecy were actually the most significant problem; not the behaviour itself.

**Master Theme 1: Summary**

This theme has explored the female partners' journeys of discovery and their experiences of the lies and deceit that accompanied this. Four of the six participants expressed an initial openness to pornography and reported their willingness to engage in mutual pornography use with their partners. As such, it seems that their partners' pornography use was not instantly a problem. Many participants went on to describe their discovery of the extent of their partners' porn use, labelled by some as "porn addiction". Although for most, this was accompanied by shock and upset, many described their sense of hope for the future of their relationships. However, there seemed to come a point for many of them where their male partners' behaviour went too far, pushing these females to their limits of acceptance. For some, this was when their partner's behaviour became interactive, be it online or offline; for others this was their male partner's lies and deceit. It would also appear that the male partners' honesty was a mediator in the participants' experiences and acceptance.

**Master Theme 2 – The Impact of the Female Partner's Meaning-Making**

Another contributor to the participants' lived experiences is their meaning-making. Some of the participants describe their negative perceptions of porn as, for example, "dirty" and "disgusting". The majority of the participants also take their partner's use of pornography as an indication of their inadequacies; they describe feeling "ugly," "unlovable," and "not good enough sexually", to name a few. The participants describe that this also contributes to feelings of shame and embarrassment, as well as a loss of self-esteem. This is captured through the following sub-themes: (1) The female partner's perception of pornography use, and (2) A tendency to internalize her male partner's behaviour.

**Subordinate Theme – "It's dirty": The Female Partner's Perception of Pornography Use**

The meaning that the female partners attach to pornography, and in particular their partners' use of pornography, appears to have a significant impact on their lived experience. For many, their meaning-making appears to lead to shame and embarrassment. This quote from Melissa illustrates this:

> *"...it's that shame and that embarrassment, you know, not only for the relationship that people have belief that we had and that I believe that we had, but because of the subject, because of the porn. It's, you know, it's dirty, it's dirty. And* ***the stuff*** *that he saw, the stuff that he,* ***the stuff*** *[emboldened to reflect Melissa's emphasis] that he wanted to do, was....not stuff that I want other people to know" (Melissa, 502-507).*

Melissa appears to be describing the layers to her shame and embarrassment which seem to derive from the meaning that she attaches to porn use. She shares that one layer of shame derives from the subject of porn itself because "it's dirty". Melissa's repetition perhaps indicates the strength with which she holds this perception. In addition, Melissa's emphasis and tone, and her use of distancing language – "**the stuff** that he saw; **the stuff** that he wanted to do", imply that, not only was he looking at pornography, but that his

choice in pornography perhaps went beyond "dirty". From her tone this seems to elicit disgust, and perhaps shock, for Melissa.

It would seem that another layer of shame and embarrassment derives from the relationship that both she and others perceived her as having. Perhaps Melissa's desire for others to remain unaware of her partner's behaviour reflects the shame and embarrassment caused by the disparity between the positive external perception of her relationship, and the reality of her relationship now. Melissa refers to her beliefs about the relationship in the past tense and thus it seems that she has lost this perception of her relationship. This sense of loss will be discussed further in the sub-theme 'The loss of the fairy-tale relationship'.

Similarly, Julie describes being "disgusted by [porn]" (Julie, 1184) and creates a story to hide the true reason for the end of her relationship:

> *P: ...obviously once we split up erm the tale was he'd had an affair [...] so I just had to you know stick to my story that yes he had met somebody else, erm*
>
> *I: And what what made you say that, that he'd met somebody else?*
>
> *P: [Pause] well, I don't know I think you're just so embarrassed and ashamed really [Julie inhales deeply]" (Julie, 578-589).*

Julie's deep inhaling at the end is perhaps an indication of the intensity still attached to the shame and embarrassment that she is describing. It seems that, for Julie, an external perception that her husband met somebody else carries less shame and embarrassment than the truth. In a similar way to Julie deeming an affair as less shameful, Jade shares that, of all the things that her partner could have been addicted to, pornography and sex are the worst:

> *"Of all things to get addicted to, I mean, I, I guess I am a bit prudish anyway and I always have been but of all things, I think I would have preferred it if he was addicted drugs or alcohol because you know, sex?! Really?! Pornography?! I just think it's disgusting, it makes you think of you know, lonely old men that do flashing" (Jade, 689-694).*

Jade's tone – "Sex?! Really?! Pornography?!" – suggests that there is something horrifying, outrageous and repulsive about pornography, and indeed she goes on to share her perception of pornography as "disgusting". Furthermore, the negative connotations that she attaches to pornography of "lonely old men that do flashing," could contribute to Jade's sense that a different addiction would have been preferable. Perhaps similarly to Julie's perception of an affair, Jade may perceive these latter addictions as having less negative connotations and being more socially acceptable.

Another significant factor in the female partners' meaning-making seems to derive from a perception of porn use as cheating, as illustrated by Melissa's quote:

> *"I had found some kind of pornography magazine in the back of his truck [...] I told him I didn't like it [...] and to me, it was cheating" (Melissa, 39-45).*

It seems that Melissa equates porn use with cheating. Thus, perhaps the devastation described in Master Theme One (accompanying the discoveries), is also the result of a discovery of the male partner's infidelity.

Carrie shares a different perception of porn:

> *"I'm not the girl who has major moral judgements about it. [5 second pause] I was never the girl who...was disgusted, or thought it was evil [...] The part about it that bothers me the most is not what he looks at, so much as the effect that it has on him and me" (Carrie, 454-463).*

It seems interesting to note that Carrie does not share the disgust of the other participants. My sense is that Carrie's meaning-making perhaps has a positive impact on her lived experience as it seems that her accepting attitude towards porn makes it a more tolerable experience, removing the sense of shame and embarrassment described by the other participants.

To summarize, this sub-theme has explored the meaning that the female partners attach to pornography. Negative meaning attached to pornography seemed to elicit feelings of shame and embarrassment. For two participants, the meaning they attached to

pornography was so strong that they indicate that a drug or alcohol addiction, or an affair would have been preferable. The meaning attached to pornography also extended to impact the female partner's perception of herself; this will be explored in the next sub-theme.

**Subordinate Theme – "I just thought I wasn't good enough": A Tendency to Internalize Her Male Partner's Behaviour**

The participants describe a plethora of ways in which they feel that their partners' behaviour meant something about them, illustrated in the quote below:

> *"I felt he, he turned to porn cause I wasn't good enough...I wasn't attractive, I wasn't desirable. I felt like he must think I'm ugly and he must not love me. So...ultimately I felt ugly, unlovable, unwanted, replaceable, discardable and and overall just less-than" (Melissa, 277-281).*

This quote captures the way in which the participants took their male partners' behaviours as indicative of their inadequacies, seemingly internalizing the messages they felt were being communicated by the porn use. The words that Melissa uses to describe herself suggest that her partner's behaviour has had a profound impact on her view of herself as "less-than", potentially with devastating effects on her self-esteem. The next extract explores this further:

> *"...for the porn because of all of the women that he looked at, you know, erm, people that are not me [...] a lot of pictures that I found you know, perfect bodies you know, fitness models, that's not me. And...if that's what he wanted, if that's what he found attractive and that doesn't look like me, then where does that leave me? And also, the fact that he had that physical affair meant that he chose someone else, over me" (Melissa, 265-272).*

It seems from Melissa's narrative that she is comparing herself unfavourably to the images that she discovered her husband had been looking at. There seems to be, for Melissa, a sense of competing and feeling that she has lost out to both the porn, and the woman with whom he had a physical affair; both of which he repeatedly chose to engage with rather than her.

Carrie shares a similar sense of competing and losing and shares the impact of this on her:

> *"when he chooses to look at that instead of me, it affects how I feel about my own femininity, sexuality, beauty, whatever and I, I want to celebrate those things, I want to feel good about myself, and apart from him I do, but when he comes back in with that activity happening in his life, in his world, it, it shadows me in a sense and I don't feel as erm [4 second pause] I just don't feel as empowered I guess for lack of a better word or as aware, as excited, whatever about myself (Carrie, 471-479).*

Carrie's use of the phrase "it shadows me" seems to imply that the porn dominates "his life" and "his world" and Carrie perceives herself as pushed aside. Carrie shares that she wants to feel good about herself but it seems that her husband's behaviour makes this difficult for her, with negative consequences for her sense of "femininity, sexuality, beauty". It would therefore appear that Carrie's perception of taking second place to the pornography has a negative impact on her confidence and self-esteem.

Hannah similarly shares her feelings that the porn was more important to him than she was however it seems that the meaning she attaches to her partner's behaviour goes further than her attractiveness or sexual adequacy:

> *"...if he's wanking, he doesn't want to have sex does he, he's cum, he's done, so why would he, why would he want to have sex with me" (Hannah, 135-137).*

> *"I guess for me, if he wants to have sex that's because he loves me, and that is very weak pathetic thing to say, but that's, that's me and if you don't want to then you probably don't love me" (Hannah, 450-453).*

It seems that for Hannah, the main difficulty lies with the meaning that she attaches to her partner's lack of desire to have sex with her as a result of his porn use and masturbation. For Hannah, sex seems to equate love, and thus without sex, she believes that her partner does not love her. As such, it would seem that ultimately, the meaning that Hannah attaches to her partner's porn use results in her belief he does not love her.

Jade is the only participant who does not believe that her husband's behaviour means anything about her:

> *"...a lot of women are very upset by the fact that their husbands have looked at other women naked [...] and it's not something that bothers me, erm, and it's not something that would make me feel insecure about my body at all (Jade, 505-510).*
>
> *"I never thought it meant anything about me because he'd started way before we met" (Jade, 547-548).*

It seems that, knowing that her partner's behaviours predated their relationship, Jade is able to take a position of externalizing his behaviour, and thus his porn use does not make her feel insecure about her body. Amongst the participants in this study, Jade's position is an unusual one to have maintained throughout her whole experience. However, some of the participants describe that as they progressed through their journeys, they were increasingly able to take a position resembling Jade's; externalizing their partner's behaviour.

Julie shares that her increased ability to externalize came from going on a four-day intensive course that she attended for female partners of male pornography users:

> *"...just knocks you totally and just thoughts, well why would he have to go elsewhere you know, what was, I've always tried to keep quite slim and fit, you know, and hair, make-up and, you know it's just, but they helped to explain that on the course and said it's, you know it's an addiction it's something that's in him, it is almost an illness and it's absolutely nothing to do with you...because the other girls on the course, you know, they were all attractive, and you know we're all nice people [...] erm, but gradually, you know, with a lot of support from everyone that confidence is is coming back" (Julie, 1022-1032).*

It seems that for Julie, going on the course provided a range of elements that contributed to her noted increase in confidence. Firstly, psycho-education about the nature of addiction helped Julie to recognize that her husband's behaviour was the result of an illness and had "absolutely nothing to do with [her]". Secondly, Julie seems to be saying that the group format allowed her to meet other women and realize that they were "all

attractive" and "nice people", and their partners had also engaged in pornography use, seemingly reinforcing for Julie that his behaviour was not an indication of her attractiveness, personality, or sexual adequacy, but rather "something that's in him". In being able to engage with this alternative perception, Julie describes her confidence returning.

In summary, this sub-theme has explored the female partners' meaning-making about themselves. Many describe a sense of competing with porn, or other offline women; a competition which they repeatedly lost. Some took this as an indication of them being sexually inadequate, unattractive, and unlovable; negatively impacting their self-esteem and confidence. However, it seems that an increased ability to externalize their male partners' behaviour aided the return of their confidence and self-esteem.

**Master Theme 2: Summary**

This master theme has focused on the way in which the meaning-meaning of the participants, in relation to both porn and themselves, impacts their lived experience. For some, their perception of porn as "dirty" and "disgusting" brought a sense of shame and embarrassment, sometimes leading to descriptions of other difficulties such as a different addiction or an affair as preferable. Understanding the perception of porn use as cheating seems to provide further insight into the devastation that accompanies the discoveries of porn use in Master Theme One. Many describe a sense of competing and losing in that their male partner has repeatedly chosen to sexually engage with porn, or other women, over them. It seems that the participants internalize their partner's behaviour, taking it as an indication that they are sexually inadequate, unattractive and unlovable. Consequently, many of the female partners report the impact of this on their confidence and self-esteem. However, it seems that with time, some are able to externalize their partner's porn use; accompanied by an increase in confidence.

## Master Theme 3 – A Lonely Experience

Many aspects of the participants' accounts seem to give a sense of the loneliness attached to this experience. This will be explored through the following sub-themes: (1) The significance of her male partner's response, (2) The invalidating response from society, and (3) Lonely experience mediated by support.

### Subordinate Theme – The Significance of Her Male Partner's Response

Many participants describe their male partner's attitude towards his pornography use and the impact of this on her lived experience. It seems that when their male partners' views did not match their view, the participants felt that their male partners were unable to understand their perspective. Julie's quote provides an illustration of this:

> *"he just couldn't really seem to or maybe didn't want to understand how he'd betrayed me, as if he he just thought that was alright and it was that was another side to his life" (Julie, 675-678).*

Julie describes how her partner's response compares to those of the other women on the four-day course she attended for female partners of pornography/sex addicts:

> *"...the other women, erm, there, erm, the ones who were staying with their partners they had, the men had identified they had a problem and they were really trying to do something about it and two of them, the girls, the partners didn't know this but they'd actually started coming to [name of organization] for erm, help themselves, so they'd realized, you know, they had to do something about it, you see Jeff never did that, and you know when it all came to light, you know, it was just referred to as a 'silly business'" (Julie, 866-874).*

Julie seems to be highlighting the differences between her partner's response, and the responses experienced by the women in the group who were staying with their male partners. It seems that for Julie, her husband's response was problematic in a number of ways: firstly, his inability or refusal to acknowledge the betrayal, thus seemingly unable to see things from Julie's perspective; secondly, never identifying that he had a problem and thus never doing anything about it; and thirdly referring to his behaviour as 'silly business', a phrase which seems incongruent with Julie's perception of his behaviour. It seems that all

of these factors could be experienced by Julie as minimizing, dismissive and invalidating of her experience and emotions and Julie seems to be implying here that had her male partner responded differently, she may have stayed with him.

Carrie shares that she has had to learn how to address the incongruence in their views of his pornography use:

> *"I've had to learn to speak up when I don't feel comfortable. […]if he says "oh that's not a problem, that's not bothering me, or I didn't see that or I didn't watch that," we [female partners] feel like "well ok if he says it's not a problem, then I shouldn't be reacting to it." But kind of shifting that focus to say "look, if it bothers me, that's legit enough"" (Carrie, 610-617).*

Carrie appears to be saying that initially, her feelings and responses towards her partner's behaviours were dictated by her partner's response. Thus, it seems that not only might she have experienced the initial distress about his behaviour, but also an additional layer of distress from feeling that she should not be reacting in that way. However, it seems that over time, Carrie has been able to develop her assertiveness; owning and standing up for her feelings rather than allowing them to be dismissed or minimized in accordance with her partner's perception. As such, it would seem that, regardless of her partner's response, Carrie is now able to "honour [her] own feelings about something" (Carrie, 620). By doing so, Carrie's husband may have more opportunity to understand Carrie's perspective, perhaps appeasing the sense of loneliness that she might otherwise feel if her feelings were dismissed or overruled by him.

To summarize, this sub-theme has explored the ways in which the male partner's response impacts the female partner's lived experience, contributing to a sense of loneliness. However, it seems that the dismissive and invalidating responses experienced by the female partners extended to society. This will be explored in the next sub-theme.

**Subordinate Theme – "What's the problem?!": The Invalidating Response from Society**

The participants describe the way in which their attempts to share their experiences with those around them are met with invalidating and dismissive responses. This seems a further source of distress and conflict, often leading the female partners to question and doubt themselves. Sophia's quote is an example of this:

> *"It was very hard because I did consult with you know like just with a few colleagues and friends and […] she said "but so what?" I was like well "but you know I got a bit upset" and she just said that was silly, and at that point I was thinking, you know, maybe it's my fault, maybe you know it's just me, maybe she's right, maybe I am silly, maybe it's something that, you know, it shouldn't make me upset because you know it's the norm like, as she said "you know all the men they all do it so why you making a fuss about it"" (Sophia, 115-124).*

Sophia's friend's response that it was "silly" for Sophia to be upset by her partner's behaviour seems to highlight a conflict between Sophia's feelings, and society's attitude that "it's the norm". This perhaps leads Sophia to doubt herself and question whether she is being silly and "making a fuss about it". I therefore wonder if Sophia ends up not only upset about her partner's behaviour, but in addition, distressed by thinking that there is something wrong with her for being upset. Sophia later shares that this experience was a deterrent for her sharing this with anyone else and thus it seems that she was left alone with her difficulties. Many participant accounts imply that there is a societally-accepted norm that "all men do it" and thus the female partners should not have a problem with it. This would seem to imply that the behaviour being seen as commonplace removes the possibility of it being a problem, meaning that when the female partners share their distress, the response they receive from society is invalidating of their emotions.

Carrie shares her pain and anger at the message she received from society:

> *"...one day I read a book, a very mainstream Christian book, for women who erm had sex addict husbands, and the book said, and this is not verbatim but it's very close erm "God can't have two sick suffering children,*

> *he needs you to get well so that you can help your husband." And I just about died, Charley, I literally threw that book across the room it made me so angry, that this message to women was "you can't be hurt, you've gotta get over that so that you can help him". Damn it made me mad, I cried for two days straight and I didn't know why and one of my friends said "look, you're tapping into the collective pain of women who hear this message"" (Carrie, 672-684).*

Carrie's account gives an insight into the pain and rage that she felt at receiving the message that she cannot be hurt by this experience as she needs to help her husband. Her description of throwing the book across the room and crying for two days straight gives an insight into the intensity of these emotions for Carrie. It would seem that this message may be particularly hurtful for Carrie having earlier in the interview given a sense of feeling like the third wheel in this relationship. Not only does she feel that, in her husband's mind, pornography is more important than her; but also, in society's mind, her feelings are not important as she has to help her husband. As such, both her husband and the pornography take priority over her in this relationship, which appears to contribute to Carrie's loneliness.

In summary, it would seem that society's response perhaps creates an additional layer of distress for the female partners. Not only are they distressed by their experience, but on top of that, society adds to this by telling them that they should be ok with it. This then sometimes leads to the female partners questioning themselves and wondering if there is something wrong with them. Furthermore, it seems that society's response, with no recognition or support for the female partners' feelings, leaves the participants feeling isolated and alone.

*I found the way in which the friends, family members, and colleagues of the participants dismissed and invalidated their distress quite shocking. There seemed to be an unwillingness or inability to understand and empathize with the female partners' experiences. This perhaps highlighted a lack of societal awareness of the various impacts attached to this experience for female partners. I wonder if elements of this theme mirror*

*my own lack of awareness that I noticed during the triages (discussed in the introduction); a contributing factor to selecting this area for my research.*

**Subordinate Theme – Loneliness of Experience Mediated by Support**

Across the cases, the participants describe a continuum of support. It seems that for those who felt unwilling or unable to seek support, this contributed to the lonely nature of their experience. For those who were able seek support, this perhaps lessened the loneliness of their experience. This subtheme has links with other subthemes, particularly those that discuss factors that might deter the female partners from seeking support including 'The invalidating response from society' and 'The female partner's perception of pornography use'.

When asked if she had sought any help, Sophia responded:

> *"...a few times I considered it but, to be very honest, if I was in my country, I would have had professional help […] Here it's a lot harder, so here, especially this kind of help, […] is quite hard to get hold of so I thought about it but then, when I thought about it, how I, I wouldn't even know how to go about it" (Sophia, 822-832).*

Sophia shares that she considered seeking professional help; however, she highlights the challenge of accessing "this kind of help" and shares that she would not have known how to go about it. It is unclear whether Sophia is referring to therapeutic help generally or support around porn use specifically, however either way, it would seem that without access to professional help, and feeling unable to receive support from those in her personal life, Sophia was left alone.

Unlike Sophia, Julie was able to seek and receive support both personally and professionally. She shares: "I can't speak too highly of the support I've had really" (Julie, 800). Julie talks about feeling much happier and relates this to the support she has received:

> *"...through them [my girlfriends] and through my family and through my GP and through the counselling I've had, and through work they've been very understanding [...] you know, yeah so, so that's that's been really...yeah*

> *'cos for women who haven't got that, I I don't know how they would survive really" (Julie 1168-1175).*

Julie seems to credit the support that she has received with her survival, questioning how women in her position without this support would survive. It seems that for Julie, her willingness and ability to seek and receive support from a variety of sources was particularly beneficial.

In sum, the participants presented a continuum of attitudes to seeking and receiving support. For those who sought help, it seems that this was beneficial and contributed to their ability to overcome this difficult experience. For those who felt unable to seek help, it seems that they were left with little support and thus were left to deal with their difficulties alone.

**Master Theme 3: Summary**

This master theme has explored the factors that may contribute to the sense of loneliness attached to this experience for the female partners in this study. For many, it seems that the dismissive response from their male partners indicates a lack of understanding which leaves the partners feeling unsupported. Another experience shared by many participants was the invalidating response when attempting to share their experiences with friends or colleagues. This often led to the female partners questioning whether there was something wrong with them, and appeared to discourage the participants from sharing their experiences with others in the future, thus leaving the female partners feeling isolated and alone. It seems that the female partners' ability and willingness to seek support was a mediator in the extent of the loneliness of their experience. For those who sought help, this seemed to lessen the loneliness, for those who felt unable to seek help, it seems that they were left with little support, contributing to a sense of loneliness. This theme seems to suggest the need for an increase in societal awareness about the potential significance of

this experience, as well as an awareness amongst, and availability of, professionals to provide support in this area.

## Master Theme 4 – The Layers of Loss

From the participants' accounts, a theme of loss seems to form a significant part of their lived experience. The various layers of loss are captured through three sub-themes: (1) The loss of the fairy-tale relationship, (2) The loss of an idealized male partner, and (3) The loss of self.

### Subordinate Theme – "It was a fairytale...and so now I know there are no fairytales": The Loss of the Fairy-Tale Relationship

The majority of the participants give what could be considered somewhat idyllic descriptions of the initial phases of their relationships. However, it seems that the discoveries of their partners' pornography use and other behaviours challenge their initial perceptions, and thus their perceptions of their relationships change. The participants' narratives seem to highlight a realization of a disparity between the fairy-tale relationships that they perceived themselves as having, and the reality of their relationships now, thus experiencing a loss of the fairy-tale relationship. It seems that their initial idealized perceptions of the relationships mean that they have much further to fall, adding a layer of devastation. Jade's account below gives an example of this:

*Note to reader: The following quote contains content of a sexually violent nature that may be distressing for some to read.*

> *"We were great, we were so happy and everyone said that we had a really good relationship and a lot of our friends would actually say you know, that's what they were looking for, er, a relationship like ours and then you know, so many years later we're sat on the sofa and he's telling me how he knows how to go and pay for sex and and how he likes watching women get raped and...I don't I don't know what happens in-between [laughs] to ever, yeah, I don't know where those years went and how you know, how it was, went so lovely to just so terrible" (Jade, 490-498).*

Jade begins by saying how "great" and "so happy" they were at the start. Her language in describing the relationship seems to leave little room for any doubt about the success of this relationship. It seems that this was further evidenced and reinforced by their friends saying that they were seeking a relationship like Jade's. She then shares how this has, in a rather extreme way, completely turned around. In Jade's case, her partner's behaviour extends significantly beyond watching porn; in addition to the behaviours outlined in the quote above, Jade reports that they had stopped having sex because "he scared [her] and because [sex] didn't always feel consensual" (Jade, 196), and she describes a realization that she has been "in an abusive relationship for years" (Jade, 913-914). Although Jade's may be an extreme example, it illustrates just how far Jade had to fall from things being "so lovely" to being "so terrible". Her laugh towards the end gives a sense of her disbelief about the situation.

*Following the disclosure of her abusive relationship, during Jade's debrief I felt it was important to ensure that she was aware of the support available to her. Jade told me that she had already discussed this with her GP and had been in contact with local charities that support women in abusive relationships. I also discussed with her the organizations and resources available specific to her partner's pornography use and she was already aware of these.*

*The days following Jade's interview, and every time I re-read it during analysis, I felt disturbed by the content of her story, particularly her partner's behaviour. I wondered if this was an insight into Jade's feelings as she described that it made her "physically sick how grossed out by him [she] was" (Jade, 800-801). There was a strong part of me that considered not including the extreme nature of Jade's account; this was partly due to not wanting to write about it, and also because it seemed to go so far beyond 'porn use' that I questioned whether it was representative or relevant to the study. However, the aim of the*

*study is to gain an in-depth understanding of lived subjective experience and this formed a significant part of Jade's story.*

When asked about the changes in Melissa's feelings about her relationship, she describes that:

> *"It was a fairytale, it was meant to be. And I lived in denial. And so now I know there are no fairytales, you cannot live in denial" (Melissa, 384-386).*

Melissa shares her initial perception of her relationship as "a fairytale" and "meant to be". In reporting that she now knows that "there are no fairytales", Melissa seems to be implying that she no longer sees her relationship in the same way, suggesting a loss of the fairy-tale relationship.

Julie shares that the death of her husband would have been preferable as it would have allowed her to hold onto happy memories and to maintain an untarnished perception of the relationship:

> *"A friend of mine was bereaved at the same time...and we've discussed this at length and she and I think it would have been easier if he'd died, I honestly do you know and she's, she said 'I can look back on my marriage Julie and nothing, so many happy memories I've no blemishes at all and you know I still love him to bits but he's gone' (Julie, 1002-1009).*

It seems that had he died, Julie could have maintained her idealized perception of the marriage with 'no blemishes'. Instead, she has lost her unblemished marriage.

*I was struck by the strong presence of the fairy-tale relationships reported across the accounts of the participants. In the initial stages of my analysis I noticed that I became particularly focused on the participants' constructions of their relationships. I thought about why it might be so important to them to have and maintain such fairy-tale relationships, and ultimately it got me thinking about their relationship patterns. In discussing this with my supervisor I was reminded that my research was about the experience of the female partner in relation to the porn use, and not trying to understand the relationship. However this did highlight the potential for another interesting piece of*

*research to be done about the relationships themselves. I refocused my thinking and considered the relevance of the female partners' fairy-tale relationships to the porn use and my interpretation of this was that the fairy-tale relationships gave the female partners further to fall, making their discoveries more devastating.*

*Having gotten caught up in the relationship construction, I reflected on my role as a researcher and as a practitioner. Perhaps this is an example of a time where I struggled with the balance between the two. Whereas as a researcher my role was to gather information and use that to deepen my own understanding of their experiences – I found myself drifting towards thinking about how a better understanding of the relationship and relationship patterns may help the female partners make a change – perhaps as I might do in my role as a therapist.*

To summarize, this sub-theme has explored how, for some of the participants, their discovery of their male partner's behaviours creates a disparity between their initial perception of their fairy-tale relationship, and the reality of their relationship now. As such, the participants describe a loss of the fairy-tale relationship. Furthermore, it would seem that the initial perceptions of fairy-tale relationships give the female partners much further to fall, adding an additional layer of distress.

**Subordinate Theme – "This knight in shining armour, to me, now was just a f***ing liar": The Loss of an Idealized Male Partner**

It seems that the female partners' fairytales extended to their male partners – their "knights in shining armour". In addition to the loss of the fairy-tale relationship, the participants' accounts highlight an additional layer of loss – the loss of their idealized male partner. As with the relationships, the participants often present somewhat idealized perceptions of their male partners, and describe the hurt at discovering the incongruence between their initial perception of their male partner, and the person they are now faced

with. For Hannah, it is the loss of a kind and attentive partner, replaced by a calculating liar:

> *"He always cooks dinner, and he would call me "where are you? On the bus yet? What time will you be home?" So I always was like "aww, he's, he's, dinner's gonna be on the table" blah blah blah blah blah. But [...] then I could see how calculating and, after that he never phoned again to say what time are you going to be home. Because he wasn't doing it to have a chat and be caring, he was doing it so he could have a wank before I got home, and that fucking hurt so bad. Cause this knight in shining armour, to me, now was just a fucking liar" (Hannah, 558-568).*

Hannah seems to be describing a move from a perfect fairytale with her "knight in shining armour" who is caring and has dinner on the table when she gets home, to a very different picture where her partner is "now just a f***ing liar." Her swearing suggests that this still carries intense emotion for Hannah, perhaps anger. In describing that he is now "*just* a f***ing liar" [italicized for emphasis], it seems that Hannah holds a compartmentalized view of her partner where he is either a "knight in shining armour", or he is a calculating liar – he cannot be both. As such it seems that she has lost her "knight in shining armour". This is consistent with other accounts that describe a personality split in their male partner. Julie describes her partner as having "very much a Jekyll and Hyde personality" (Julie, 423). Jade also describes the contrasted characteristics of her husband's personalities:

> *"This wasn't him like, my Jake, although he's a big guy he's meek and mild and kind and friendly and would do anything for anyone and he was just horrendous. Erm, and he would say really horrible things about me constantly" (Jade, 356-359).*
>
> *"…this guy that was so sweet in the beginning turn into such, you know, a weird pervert" (Jade, 802-803)*

Jade seems to be suggesting that this "horrendous" person is not *her* Jake; *her* Jake is kind and friendly. Her choice of words – "my Jake" – perhaps implies a strong sense of attachment to *this* Jake. It also perhaps suggests that there is something special about her partner. She later reinforces this: "that's not something you expect to hear from your partner

at all you know, *especially mine*" [italicized for emphasis]. Jade seems to be suggesting that one might expect this behaviour from some people, but not from *her* partner who is "meek, mild, kind and friendly". It would appear that seeing her partner as someone who is especially unlikely to act in this way because of the characteristics she perceives him as having, has given Jade further to fall. She has lost her idealized partner "that was so sweet in the beginning"; instead he has been replaced with a "weird pervert". She goes on to say:

> *"As he started to get better I started to see the old Jake in there and I do love him, I still love that Jake but just really don't like the other one" (Jade, 671-673).*

Jade's narrative is consistent with others who refer, in the present tense, to the "old" partner whom they still love, and the other partner whom they do not like. Similarly to Hannah, it seems that Jade maintains a compartmentalized view of her partner: the "sweet, kind and friendly" man that she loves, and the "weird pervert" whom she does not like.

Melissa's loss seems to have many layers; here she shares the devastation caused by the change in her perception of her husband:

> *"It literally felt like, the world, my world had just cracked open and I was falling. I...he all of a sudden became a stranger, an enemy, a person that [sighs] I didn't recognize, the things that he was looking at, talking about, that wasn't the guy that I knew. And remember, I've known him since I was 10, so it was like, my world just completely fell away, it was, it was complete chaos, and just total...devastation" (Melissa, 140-146).*

This quote seems to illustrate the intensity of Melissa's "total devastation". In my mind, her extreme language seems akin to that which might be used to describe the devastating effects of a natural disaster. Her repeated use of the phrase "my world" implies the intense and multi-layered loss that Melissa seems to be describing when she says that her world "cracked open and [she] was falling". Firstly, she has lost her "soul mate" (Melissa, 26) who has been replaced by an "enemy," "a person that [she] didn't recognize". It seems that this is worsened for Melissa by the fact that she has known him since she was 10 years old. Perhaps having known someone for such an extensive period of time, for

Melissa, brings an expectation of knowing them well, having a close relationship, being able to trust that person; all of which seem to have been contradicted by her experience with her husband.

Later in the interview Melissa shares that "for a long time, I couldn't separate him and I, we were practically the same person" (Melissa, 392-393). Therefore, it seems that a second layer of loss here is that, if they were the same person, but he is now a stranger, where does that leave her, and her identity? Who is she now? It seems that in losing him, she has also lost herself. This will be discussed further in the next sub-theme – "The loss of self".

In summary, this sub-theme has explored the way in which the female partners' loss of their fairy-tale relationships extends to include the loss of their "knights in shining armour". Their narratives highlight a split between their old partners – who are described as kind, attentive, and friendly; and their new partners, described as, for example, "weird pervert", liar, enemy, and horrendous. It seems that the participants hold a compartmentalized view, unable to integrate the various aspects of their male partners' characters.

**Subordinate Theme - "It has destroyed the self that I was": The Loss of Self**

Another loss described by many of the female partners is a loss of themselves. When asked about the impact on herself, Melissa shares:

> *"Oh...[sighs]...it has destroyed the self that I was. It has destroyed that person. I'm going to have to, and I've been trying to rebuild myself basically from ground up. [...] it made me doubt myself, because how could I be so close to someone, know someone so well, and they were doing all of this behind my back, without me knowing. So what's wrong with me?" (Melissa, 209-216).*

Melissa's repetition of the word "destroyed" gives an insight into the intensity with which she feels this experience has had an impact on her as a person. She seems not to be saying that this experience has changed her, but that the person that she was suffered such

irreparable damage that it brought about the end of that person's existence. As such, she has to start over, "rebuilding herself from the ground up." Melissa is also describing an experience shared with other participants; a loss of trusting herself. Her questioning of how she could be so close to someone and know someone so well, but be unaware of their activities behind her back, seems to lead Melissa to doubt herself and feel that she cannot trust herself.

Hannah also describes the impact of her partner's behaviour on her sense of self:

> *"...it knocked everything out of me. Absolutely everything. And before, because Simon would say "I miss, I always miss my happy go lucky Hannah" and I'm like... [Hannah becomes upset and begins to cry] it just knocked everything out of me, completely (Hannah, 378-382).*

Hannah's ongoing hurt seems apparent from how upset she becomes. Her description gives a sense of her feeling that, in a somewhat forceful way, her sense of being has been knocked out of her. Her repetition and reinforcement of "absolutely everything" gives the sense of there being nothing left of her. She describes that she was once "happy go lucky", implying cheeriness and a lack of worries, but perhaps now feels empty, and that there is nothing of that person left in her.

*During the interview it felt very sad to be with Hannah. Hannah became upset and I attended to her emotions in offering for us to take a break or to end the interview which Hannah declined. I felt helpless and I wonder if this was perhaps an indication of how she might feel helpless over her emotions and the situation. This is an example of a time where it was challenging to remain in my role of gathering information as a researcher. My instinct was to flip into therapist mode and I found that I had to stop myself from saying things like "it seems like this is really sad for you" – although it seemed fairly evident that this was the case, I was very conscious of not wanting to influence Hannah's narrative. In retrospect, I notice that Hannah's interview was the shortest and I think Hannah's strong emotion, and my sense of helplessness, perhaps led me to want to finish the interview*

*sooner than the others. With hindsight I realize that I felt a sense of guilt for bringing this up for Hannah and felt responsible for her experiencing this sadness. I notice that towards the end of the interview, I seem to avoid asking Hannah emotion-related questions, focusing more on the practicalities of what Hannah did or did not do and why. I also noticed that during the analysis, I was keen to communicate the intense emotional pain that I felt from Hannah during the interview.*

Carrie describes that losing herself would be the ultimate casualty of her partner's "porn addiction":

> *"Losing this relationship would not be the ultimate casualty, of this porn addiction. Losing me, losing myself, if I gave up on me for the sake of just keeping peace in the relationship, or letting him off the hook or whatever, to me that's that would be the ultimate casualty of all this" (Carrie, 794-798).*

Carrie's use of the term "casualty" gives the sense of someone being severely injured or even killed – perhaps Carrie is describing that the worst outcome of this experience could extend as far as her own sense of being suffering severe injury or even being killed. It seems that for Carrie, this would be the most distressing and upsetting outcome.

**Master Theme 4: Summary**

This theme has explored the layers of loss attached to the female partners' experiences. The participants share the distress and upset that accompany the realization of a disparity between their perception of the fairy-tale relationship, and the reality of their current relationship. As such, it seems that the loss of the fairy-tale relationship gives them further to fall. For many participants, the loss extends to their idealized male partner and the participants describe the hurt and upset caused by this. Finally, the female partners share the impact of their experience on their sense of self, sometimes to the extent of their experience having "destroyed" the person that they were. This seems to lead to a sense of the female partners suffering the loss of themselves.

## Reflexivity

Throughout the analysis, the clustering of the themes underwent multiple revisions. The refinement of the themes continued throughout the write-up, ensuring that they were relevant as well as representative and not repetitive. As many of the themes were linked, it often proved difficult to decide whether the themes were distinct enough to remain separate, or if the overlap meant that they should be collapsed. For example, I initially had a theme entitled 'shame and embarrassment', however, the content of this theme had significant cross over with the themes regarding the female partners' meaning-making and thus these themes were merged. With other themes, although they overlapped it was deemed that they were distinct enough to remain separate, such as the sub-themes 'The loss of the fairy-tale relationship,' and 'The loss of an idealized male partner'. Appendix 11 provides a diagrammatic representation of the drafting and redrafting of the themes.

Titling the themes also brought challenges. Having written a theme, there was sometimes a distinct feeling that the theme title did not accurately capture the content, and thus the process of deciphering a more appropriate theme title would begin again. In addition, I was keen for the themes to capture something of the experience rather than being too descriptive. I was surprised at how much I felt in relation to my themes and their titles. On multiple occasions I was not happy with either the clustering or the name of a theme and there would be a distinct feeling that I could physically notice in my body. As the process of revisiting this would progress, there would come a point where it felt 'right' and I would note a feeling of relief and a sense of satisfaction that the theme accurately captured what I wanted it to.

# CHAPTER FOUR
# DISCUSSION

This chapter brings together the information presented in previous chapters by discussing the analysis in the context of the existing literature. References will be made to further research, distinct from the literature review, reflecting the expectation that interviews and analysis in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) will take the researcher to "new and unanticipated territory" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 113). The implications and applications of the research will be explored, particularly in relation to counselling psychology, as well as the limitations and suggestions for future research.

## Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Existing Literature

The findings from the current research will be discussed in the context of existing literature, including how the findings from the current study expand on the existing understanding of this phenomenon. As this study is concerned with the participants' subjective experiences, porn use was not defined or labelled. As such, any references to labels such as "porn addiction" or "sex addiction" throughout this chapter are a reflection of the terms used in the existing literature and by the participants.

### The Ongoing Discoveries: Pushing Her Limits of Acceptance

#### An Initial Openness to Pornography Use

Much of the existing qualitative literature exploring the experiences of female partners only seems to frame the discovery of their partner's porn use as negative (e.g. Cavaglion & Rashty, 2010; Hall, 2015; Steffens & Rennie, 2006), suggesting that discovering sexual behaviours such as porn use, cybersex and porn/sex addiction is traumatic for female partners (Hall, 2015; Schneider et al., 2012; Steffens & Rennie, 2006). However, the findings from the current study suggest that other experiences also exist. Four of the six participants described their initial openness to pornography, and willingness to

engage in mutual pornography use with their partner. For some, this seemed to be a response to discovering their partner's use of porn and perhaps a desire to be a part of this; for one couple, purchasing and viewing pornography had begun as a mutual and shared couple activity. For one participant, it seems that she experienced her partner's disclosure of a "lifelong problem with porn" (Carrie, 173) as positive; the content of his disclosure paled into insignificance as she attached far more meaning to his honesty and openness.

By no means is this to suggest that the participants reported an overall positive experience; however, this finding highlights that the experiences of these female partners were not unilaterally negative. It would seem that, unlike much of the existing qualitative literature which adopts a harm-focused approach, the openness to positive or neutral experiences of the current study allowed for insight into a fuller picture. This is important as knowledge of positive experiences can equally inform practice by highlighting the factors deemed acceptable by the female partners, and thus giving an indication of where the limits of acceptance may lie. It would seem that for many of the participants in the current study, their male partners' use of pornography was within their limits of acceptance if they were honest about it, or if the pornography consumption was mutual. This seems consonant with the findings of Resch and Alderson (2013) who found that honesty in couples regarding porn use resulted in higher relationship satisfaction and lower levels of distress; and that mutual use resulted in lower levels of distress.

It would seem that from a therapeutic perspective, an understanding of experiences where female partners report an accepting attitude towards their male partners' porn use is as important as understanding negative experiences. For practitioners supporting male users, female partners, or couples, this understanding may provide vital information regarding the aspects of this experience that feel manageable, and those that push boundaries. For example, if as the findings suggest, openness and honesty make the experience manageable,

whereas deceit and dishonesty are aspects that feel unmanageable, therapists can work with rebuilding trust and honesty.

**Beyond the Limits of Acceptance: Understanding 'Netiquette'**

Part of this picture of acceptance also involves subsequent discoveries. Having described an initial openness to pornography use, this study found that for many, the discoveries continued as the female partners realized the extent of their male partner's porn use – labelled by some participants as porn/sex addiction. This seemingly brought challenges to the female partners' limits of acceptance that 'porn use' had not. The female partners describe initial feelings of shock and devastation, however with time, they appeared to transition to a position of hopefulness, believing that the relationship could survive. Following this it seems that the discoveries continued, this time moving beyond porn use, challenging even further the female partners' limits of acceptance. These discoveries included interactive online behaviours including web or video chats, posting ads on websites, and emotional affairs; as well as offline behaviours such as physical affairs and paying women for sex. Whilst sharing their understanding of this, participants shared their perception that porn use became a gateway to these behaviours, and that when "the videos and stuff wasn't enough anymore" (Melissa, 588), their male partners' behaviours extended. This perception seems to mirror a model of addiction which proposes that, analogous to tolerance in substance addictions, behavioural addictions such as compulsive sexual behaviour, create a need to increase the intensity of behaviour in order to achieve the same mood effect (J. E. Grant, Potenza, Weinstein, & Gorelick, 2010).

For many of the participants, the discovery that her partner's behaviour went beyond watching porn seemed to push her to her limits of acceptance. In two cases, this resulted in the female partners ending their relationships. Helsper and Whitty (2010) discuss the concept of 'netiquette' amongst couples – the social scripts or rules about what

is acceptable and unacceptable online behaviour. They report that overall, couples seem to have similar ideas regarding acceptable and unacceptable behaviours. However, this seldom seemed to be the case reported by the participants in the current study. Perhaps it is the incongruence between the male and female partners' social scripts that contributed to the distress reported by the female partners. Having said that, the male partners' tendency to hide their behaviour may lead one to question whether the male partners also perceived their behaviour as unacceptable, or whether they recognized the difference in views and therefore keep it a secret, perhaps reinforcing the hurt for female partners. Furthermore, Helsper and Whitty (2010) found that interactive online behaviours such as falling in love or cybersex[9] were deemed the most unacceptable behaviours, whilst the acceptability of 'viewing adult sites' was less clear-cut. Firstly, this further highlights the importance of distinguishing between these behaviours; and secondly seems to indicate that porn use was deemed more acceptable than the behaviours of a more interactive nature.

From a therapeutic perspective, it seems that valuable insight may be gained from understanding an individual or a couple's netiquette and the impact of this on their experience. For example, gaining an understanding of the female partners' social scripts regarding acceptable and unacceptable online behaviours may help to identify where her limits of acceptance lie. Furthermore, recognizing when her netiquette might differ from her male partner's may provide insight into one aspect of the female partner's distress.

**Tensions Arising From Lack of Distinction between Behaviours**

Whilst porn use was often within the female partners' limits of acceptance, behaviours beyond porn use consistently seemed to go beyond these limits. Thus it seems of importance to consider the tensions that arise from all of these behaviours – which seem

[9] "Defined as two or more individuals engaging in private discourse about sexual fantasies, typically accompanied by sexual self-stimulation" (Helsper & Whitty, 2010, p. 918)

inherently different in their levels of interaction – being grouped collectively, as they have been in previous research. It seems that we have a responsibility to tease apart these behaviours that may co-exist, and may even lead into one another, but that are distinct behaviours, potentially resulting in distinct experiences. The challenges encountered in the current study from such a lack of distinction perhaps highlights the importance of future research and practice in this area continuing to engage with issues such as: Is porn use the same as cybersex? Is all porn use problematic? Is all problematic porn use indicative of addiction? Are sex and porn addiction the same thing? Is it appropriate to use the terms interchangeably?

**Meaning-Making and the Emotional Struggle**

Although much of the existing literature refers to the emotional effects on female partners (e.g. Hall, 2015; Schneider, 2000; Schneider et al., 2012), the phenomenological approach of the current study enabled a more in-depth understanding of the interplay between the participants' meaning-making and their emotional struggle.

The existing literature provides suggestions regarding the factors contributing to the distressing nature of this experience for female partners. Hall (2015) suggests that sex and porn addiction are unique in the way that they violate the core of a couple's intimacy. Bergner and Bridges (2002) refer to previous research (e.g. Davis, 1986; Roberts, 1982) which highlights the following characteristics as typically associated with romantic love: (1) investment in the wellbeing of the beloved, (2) respect, (3) admiration, (4) sexual desire, (5) intimacy, (6) commitment, (7) exclusivity, and (8) understanding. Bergner and Bridges (2002) argue that when events occur that are incongruent with this depiction – such as discovering that one's partner is secretly viewing pornography or engaging in extra-marital activities – they are perceived to represent violations of the love relationship.

From the accounts of the participants in the current study it would appear that they perceived many, if not all, of the characteristics of romantic love outlined above to have been violated, and the meaning that female partners attached to this often reflected negatively on themselves. An example of this was the female participants' perception that their male partner's porn use was an indication that he had no sexual desire for her. This was upsetting for many of the female partners and often culminated in beliefs that she was sexually inadequate and that the women in the porn were doing something for him that she wanted to do but was failing at. For some, this was exacerbated by the fact that they had consciously attended to their physical appearance and were thus left wondering what more they could have done. This finding seems to echo those feminist writings that have highlighted the unrealistic body and sexual ideals depicted in the media and porn, and the impact that this can have on the mental health of women who consequently feel that they are 'not good enough' (Wolf, 1990). The participants also described a frequent sense of competing with the porn, and in some cases offline women, and the pain from 'losing' this competition, knowing that he was repeatedly choosing someone else over them. For many of the women, the knowledge that their male partner maintained sexual desire, but not for her, impacted their self-esteem and led them to internalize their partners' behaviour, creating feelings of insecurity, sexual inadequacy, and a sense of being discardable, unwanted and unattractive.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that for some of the participants, an additional layer of distress was created by the shame and embarrassment of having a partner who, because of his lack of interest in couple sex, she perceived as having no sexual desire for her. It seems that the extent to which participants were able to externalize their male partners' behaviour mediated some of their distress as it enabled the realization that their partners' porn use did not mean anything about them. This would seem to provide useful

information regarding the way in which practitioners may be able to help female partners make sense of, and externalize, their male partners' behaviours.

From a feminist perspective, the narratives seem to highlight issues regarding power and powerlessness in the way that women view and feel about themselves. Carrie for example, seems to give the sense that she is powerless to determine whether or not she feels good about herself including her femininity, sexuality, and beauty; she seems to perceive her husband as holding this power. Feminist theorists argue that women's feelings of self-worth, as well as their social value, are anchored in male-biased societal values and assertions about what it means to be a woman (Tindall et al., 2010). It seems that for many of the participants in the current study, their self-worth was anchored in their male partners' actions and as such, the female participants were left with doubts about their success in fulfilling their role as a woman including being desirable, attractive and feminine. It seems that when the participants were able to move towards externalizing their partners' behaviour, this was accompanied by a position of empowerment and an internal sense of self-worth – key elements in a feminist approach to therapy (Worell & Remer, 2002).

Violations of exclusivity and intimacy seemed closely linked. The female partners described the hurt from the sense of betrayal in that their male partners had shared with another what was supposed to be the most intimate aspect of their couple relationship. It seems that this was worsened by the fact that the female partners were available and nearby, creating a sense that their partner's behaviour was unjustified. Some of the participants described pornography use alone as a form of infidelity. However it seems important to note that feelings regarding the betrayal of intimacy were also often related to sexual acts of a more interactive nature than viewing porn.

In addition to the betrayal through sexual acts, it seems that the lies and deceit of the male partners violated an expectation that the female partners held of honesty. When the

female partners learnt of their partner's secrecy, it would appear that this created an additional layer of distress. Some of the participants felt that their male partner's dishonesty and secrecy were the most significant problem, not the behaviour itself. This would seem consonant with literature exploring online infidelity which reports that for betrayed partners, the deepest pain is not caused by the infidelity itself or any specific sexual behaviour, but by the lying, denial and loss of relationship trust (Schneider et al., 2012).

Researchers have posited that sex and porn addiction hurt partners in a way that no other addiction hurts (Hall, 2015; Tripodi, 2006) and that partners will frequently say "I could cope with any other addiction" (Hall, 2015, p. 29). Indeed in the current study one of the participants reported that she would have preferred a drug or alcohol addiction. However it seems that these preferences may extend beyond addictions as another participant reported that an affair would have been preferable as this would have carried less shame and embarrassment. The shame reported by participants often appeared to relate to the meaning that they attached to porn, for instance, as "dirty" (Melissa) and "disgusting" (Hannah, Jade). From their findings, Manning and Watson (2008) suggest that the sexual nature of this difficulty elicits shame and discomfort for female partners which would not be the case with other kinds of problems. It seems that concerns regarding the positive external perceptions of the relationship were closely linked to the female partner's shame and not wanting others to know. It seems important to note that the accepting attitude towards porn shared by one of the participants seemingly resulted in less shame and embarrassment for her. As such, the findings from the current study suggest that the meaning that a female partner attaches to porn and porn use contributes to her lived experience, particularly her sense of shame. Shame appeared to be a crucial emotion in mediating the likelihood of female partners seeking help, and thus the loneliness of their experience.

**A Lonely Experience**

A theme that stood out from the narratives in this study was the lonely nature of the female partners' experiences. It seems that there were a variety of factors that contributed to this loneliness. Firstly, as mentioned above, the meaning-making of the female partners both in relation to their partner's porn use (as "dirty", "disgusting", and making him a "weird pervert"), and to themselves (as "unlovable", "sexual inadequate", and "unattractive") evoked much shame and embarrassment and was therefore a deterrent for the female partners talking with others and seeking help. Other studies have reported similar findings, for example Schneider (2000) reports that the feelings of self-blame, shame and embarrassment that are often experienced when dealing with a partner's online sexual behaviour can deter female partners from sharing their experience with others and seeking support, and that the consequential isolation can worsen the situation. Hall (2015) highlights the social stigma faced by those dealing with porn/sex addiction, and their partners.

Secondly, when the female partners did attempt to share their distress with their male partner or their wider social network, they often received minimizing, dismissive or invalidating responses. It seems that when the views of the male and female partners were incongruent, the participants felt that their male partners were unable to understand their perspective; for example, a female partner sharing her feeling of betrayal, and her male partner minimizing his behaviour as "silly business" (Julie). This seemed a further problem for the participants because the male partner's lack of recognition meant that he was unwilling and unlikely to make changes.

The participants also reported attempts to share their distress with their wider social networks; similarly, these were often met with minimizing, dismissive or invalidating responses including "what's the problem?" and "he's a bloke". Hall (2015) suggests that

perceptions of what is considered 'normal' behaviour mean that typically, a male's behaviour will be minimized as "just what men do". For the female partners this firstly elicited self-doubt around whether they were "being silly" (Sophia) for being upset by it; and secondly, left them with no-one with whom they could share their distress for fear of being ridiculed for it, creating further isolation.

From a feminist perspective, another issue of power seems to be highlighted here: the apparent power imbalance between the male and female partners both at a relational level and a societal level. This would seem to point to a patriarchal social system whereby, in this instance, the male partners hold primary power. Relationally, it would seem that the female partners' perceptions of the porn use as problematic were overruled by their male partners' views of their porn use as non-problematic. At a societal level, it seems that the participants grappled with the issue of their wider networks not treating theirs and their male partners' positions and perspectives as equal – the male partners' behaviour was often normalized as 'what all men do' whilst the female partners received responses which suggested that their upset was unfounded and an over-reaction. Tindall et al. (2010) argue that at the core of all feminist theory is the acknowledgement of women's oppression and their position of inferiority. It is argued that women's relational experiences, as well as their societal position, are shaped by patriarchal external factors and social structures (Smail, 1991). Feminists have argued that women's behaviour is often deemed abnormal or pathological if it differs from men's. The reason for this is that male behaviour is accepted as the 'norm' against which women's behaviour is compared (Wilkinson, 1991). The way in which feminist approaches to therapeutic work identify different sources and forms of power in order to support clients in recognizing their potential to gain access both to personal and societal power seems of particular relevance here (Tindall et al., 2010).

Feminist critiques of the co-dependency model seem relevant to acknowledge in relation to this theme. Although not explicitly labeling the female partner as 'sick' in the way that the co-dependency model does, the relational and societal responses reported seem to imply some abnormality in her reaction – as if there is something wrong with her for feeling the way that she does. This would seem to indicate a lack of understanding and empathy for the female partners' emotions and experiences. Feminists might argue that a more accurate perspective is one that emphasizes how a woman is coping in a challenging situation (Collins, 1993).

The participants' narratives also seem to highlight a conflict regarding societal acceptance of pornography use. On the one hand, reports of the social stigma surrounding porn/sex addiction seems to be reflected in the female partners' meaning making, creating a sense of shame which deterred them from talking to others. On the other hand, society's dismissive response of "What's the problem? All guys do it" seems to suggest a societal acceptance of porn use which means that females were essentially made to feel that they were overreacting and should be accepting of his behaviour. Hall (2015) suggests that the lack of societal and professional understanding means that female partners not only feel betrayed by their partner's behaviour, but they also feel betrayed by those around them. Thus it would seem that there is a need for greater awareness amongst professionals and society of the distressing experience that this can be for female partners.

**The Layers of Loss**

The findings from the current study highlight the significant sense of loss that features in the female partners' narratives. Although previous researchers have referred to the loss of the self (e.g. Carnes, Delmonico, & Griffin, 2001), few have focused on the loss of the relationship and the male partner, particularly in the context of female partners' idealized perceptions. The findings from the current study suggest that many of the

participants held somewhat idyllic perceptions of the initial phases of their "fairy-tale" relationships; however, it seems that their discoveries brought challenges to these perceptions. The participants seemed to describe a realization of a disparity between the fairy-tale relationships that they perceived themselves as having, and the reality of their relationships now, thus experiencing a loss of the fairy-tale relationship. As such, it seems that the sense of loss was exacerbated by the initial idealized perceptions held by the female partners which gave them further to fall, adding a layer of devastation. Similarly, the findings suggest that the female partners held idealized perceptions of their male partners which when challenged, led to the loss of their idealized male partners. It seems that the participants' initial perceptions of their male partners as kind, attentive, sweet and friendly were replaced with descriptions of male partners who were horrendous and calculating, and perceived as enemies, strangers and liars. The participants seemed to hold in mind the old partner that they loved, and the new partner that they disliked. The findings suggest that the female partners maintained a compartmentalized perception of their male partners, unable to integrate the various characteristics of the 'old' and 'new' male partner's character. These findings seem consonant with those of Cavaglion and Rashty (2010) who reported a notable dichotomy between past and present in the narratives of the female partners in their study, suggesting that the discovery of their partners' behaviour became the turning point between their perfect past life and present difficulties. A similar split could be found in their perceptions of their 'good' and 'bad' partners, unable to integrate these attitudes into a new form. Cavaglion and Rashty (2010) suggest that the relationship before discovery was mostly idealized and that learning of the male partners' 'cyber-porn' or 'cybersex' activities resulted in the collapse of the participants' idealized perceptions of their 'perfect' partners. Hall (2015) terms this 'abstract loss', she posits that unlike bereavement or divorce, a physical person has not been lost. Instead, there is a sense of losing something that they

never really had; it seems that it is a dream or fantasy which was perceived as reality which has been lost. This is perhaps reflected in Julie's description that "it would have been easier if he'd died". It would seem that dealing with an actual loss or death would have been easier, in contrast to an abstract loss which is perceived as real but perhaps less concrete and thus harder to understand and process. The challenges with this loss are perhaps exacerbated by the lack of recognition from society and thus may constitute a form of 'disenfranchized grief' (Doka, 1989).

From a psychodynamic perspective, one may consider this through an object relations lens. The term 'object' (Freud, 1905) is used to convey the way in which people may hold perceptions of others as they imagine them to be, rather than as they really are. In reality, people have a combination of desirable and less desirable qualities whereas a fantasy object may be perceived inaccurately as "all good" or "all bad"; correspondingly, individuals may experience intense love or hate (Frankland, 2010). For many of the female partners in the current study it seems that during the initial phases of their relationships they perhaps perceived their male partners as 'all-good'; however, their ongoing discoveries challenged this perception. Many of the participants seem to describe flipping between loving their 'old' partner and disliking their 'new' partner, seemingly unable to integrate the 'good' and 'bad' perceptions that they hold. Within this framework, it may be valuable for practitioners to consider helping female partners to develop an integrated view of their male partners as whole objects, in which good and bad qualities can coexist.

It seems noteworthy that idealized perceptions of relationships and male partners have been present in both the current study and existing literature, yet little is known about the interplay between the idealized perceptions and female partners' experiences of their male partners' porn use. Might a better understanding of this provide further insight into the experiences of female partners? What led the female partners to hold such idealized

perceptions? What purpose may this have served for them? Can this tell us anything about their relationship templates or patterns? At what point are her initial idealized perceptions challenged? Does this have any parallel with her limits of acceptance?

## Clinical Implications

The increase in female partners seeking support for difficulties relating to their partner's porn use (Ayres & Haddock, 2009; Goldberg et al., 2008; Hall, 2015; Hentsch-Cowles & Brock, 2013), coupled with the fact that many therapists report feeling that they do not have the necessary training to work with this client group (Ayres & Haddock, 2009), suggests an urgent need for further information regarding therapeutic work with female partners seeking support. Ayres and Haddock (2009) argue that therapists working with issues related to pornography use have limited empirically based literature available to them; thus, the current study makes a significant contribution to knowledge in this area by providing an in-depth insight into the subjective experiences of female partners whose male partners use porn. For counselling psychologists, the focus on, and understanding of, the individual lived experience and meaning-making of female partners has particular relevance, providing a foundation from which to work with this client group. Furthermore, the current study steers away from previous tendencies to pathologize female partners through labels such as 'co-dependents' or 'co-addicts', moving towards an understanding of the lived experiences whether positive, neutral or negative.

The literature review (Chapter One) highlighted the way in which previous therapeutic recommendations have been framed as dependent on an assessment with the male partner to determine whether "the female partner is correct in her perception that her partner is pathologically involved in pornography use" (Bergner & Bridges, 2002, p. 200). In the current study, the emotional struggle found to underlie the various aspects of this experience for a female partner suggests the importance of validating her emotions and

experience regardless of whether the porn use is deemed 'pathological'. The findings from the current study suggest that this is particularly important, firstly, in light of reports that female partners are often met with invalidating, minimizing, and dismissive responses from those around them; and secondly, that previous conceptualizations have pathologized female partners' responses as indicative of 'co-dependency'. As such, it would seem that a vital role of therapists in the early stages of therapeutic work with this client group would be to provide validation of their emotions and experiences, whilst appreciating that these are likely to be subjective and relevant to the individual's meaning-making. In line with this, it seems that the meaning that female partners attach to porn and porn use plays a role in mediating their subjective experience and thus, an understanding of this meaning-making may provide valuable insight for both the therapist and client. It would therefore seem that the humanistic and phenomenological roots of counselling psychology which underpin a focus upon understanding subjectivity and meaning-making (Woolfe et al., 2010), place counselling psychologists in a particularly strong position to support female partners.

As mentioned earlier in the literature review (Chapter One) the co-dependency model, which provides the foundation for 12-step programs such as S-anon and CoSA (Codepents of Sex Addicts), has received much criticism. However, it has been reported that 12-step groups offer some benefits for partners (Laaser, 1996; Salmon, 1995; Schneider & Schneider, 1996). Manning and Watson (2008) found that although none of their participants cited 12-step groups, the women reported a preference for group format as it allowed them to feel that they were not alone. This echoes the findings from the current study which also point to several potential benefits that a group format may offer female partners seeking therapeutic support. Firstly, the regular interaction that a group can provide may help to attend to the reported loneliness of this experience. Secondly, this group interaction may be particularly meaningful given that it would be with others who have

shared a similar experience. Thirdly, the findings from the current study suggest that the opportunity to meet other women whose partners also engaged in pornography use supported the female partners to externalize their male partner's behaviour. However, in order to move away from the pathologizing nature of the co-dependency model, towards a model which promotes well-being, it is suggested that therapeutic groups take a fundamentally different approach to 12-step groups. Based on the findings from the current study, it seems that the following components may be beneficial: working to validate female partners' emotions and experiences; supporting them to externalize their partners' behaviour; and developing their assertiveness and ability to stand up for their feelings when being told that "all blokes do it so what's the problem?".

It is hoped that the accounts presented in the current study will give practitioners an insight into the complexity that accompanies this multi-layered experience for female partners. Although much of the female partners' experiences may be shared, there is also a subjective element to their experiences which seems particularly related to their meaning-making which in turn shapes how they relate and respond to this experience. It is therefore important to allow the space to explore individual experiences and meaning-making. Furthermore, an exploration of the female partner's (and couple's) netiquette could also provide valuable insight into her limits of acceptance, and guide discussions regarding individual and negotiated boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable behaviours. In addition, it seems important for practitioners to keep in mind the accompanying loss; however it appears that further research is needed in this area in order to provide specific suggestions regarding how one might work with this.

Finally, it seems that the findings from the current study can serve to provide insight into the lived experiences of female partners for male users and society in the hope that this will encourage more empathetic and understanding responses when female partners reach

out for support. Furthermore, the findings may help male porn users, and those working with them, to understand how to discuss their porn use with their female partners in a way that may be beneficial for their relationship.

## Relevance to Counselling Psychology

A thorough literature search returned few studies specifically exploring the subjective experiences of female partners with regards to their male partner's porn use, and no research specifically in the context of counselling psychology. Thus, it would seem that the current study provides a significant contribution to knowledge within the field of counselling psychology. Given the increase in female partners seeking support (Ayres & Haddock, 2009; Goldberg et al., 2008; Hall, 2015; Hentsch-Cowles & Brock, 2013), it is possible that counselling psychologists will encounter this presentation. The values of counselling psychologists places them in a particularly strong position to work with female partners of male porn users, and it seems that counselling psychologists could also go beyond this population to also use the findings from this study to inform work with couples and male porn users. The current study has highlighted the importance of counselling psychologists prioritizing the female partners' subjective experiences by understanding their meaning making as a significant mediator in their experience. Additionally, the current study has highlighted the importance of counselling psychologists' focus on facilitating well-being (M. Cooper, 2009), in contrast to previous clinical suggestions which have tended to be dominated by a focus on treating pathology. In terms of counselling psychologists' focus on understanding individuals as socially and relationally embedded (M. Cooper, 2009), the current research has suggested that counselling psychologists may need to be aware of the impact that the dismissive and invalidating responses from both male partners and society can have on female partners, and to be mindful that they do not inadvertently echo such views themselves.

Although the values of counselling psychology seem particularly suited to working with this client group, with regards to the doctorate in counselling psychology, the British Psychological Society (BPS) does not currently seem to set a requirement for knowledge regarding working with couples (BPS, 2016). Regardless of whether the female partner presents alone, or with her male partner, this difficulty seems to be inherently embedded within the couple relationship. Given the focus on understanding individuals as relationally embedded (M. Cooper, 2009), which seems to have particular relevance to this topic, it seems that an understanding of working with couples could provide valuable insight for counselling psychologists.

## Critique of the Research

A strength of the current research lies with its commitment to Yardley's (2000) four principles through which the validity and quality of qualitative research can be assessed: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance.

### Sensitivity to Context

Smith et al. (2009) argue that IPA researchers demonstrate sensitivity to context from the start of the research process. The very choice of IPA as a methodology for the current research was based on the perceived need for a sensitivity to context via close attention to the idiographic and the particular, as well as an appreciation of the participant as a relationally-embedded being. Furthermore, sensitivity to the socio-cultural setting was demonstrated by acknowledging the interactional nature of research interviews, and the careful navigation of the participant-researcher dynamic. Sensitivity to the data being worked with was demonstrated by grounding analytic claims in the accounts obtained, and through providing verbatim extracts, giving participants a voice. An awareness of the

existing literature (demonstrated in the literature review) provided a further contextual element.

**Commitment and Rigour**

Commitment and rigour were demonstrated during the interview process through the attentiveness to the participant. The systematic and thorough analysis of each case in order to attend to the idiographic commitment of IPA, as well as the analysis that moved beyond a simple description of what was there, to an interpretation of what it meant, is also demonstrative of commitment and rigour. In addition to the verbatim extracts allowing the reader to check that the conclusions were grounded in the data; supervision and peer checking were used throughout the analytic process to verify the interpretations made by the researcher. The commitment to reflexivity was also aimed at increasing the rigour of the research by exploring my own position, how that position had the potential to affect the research, and in doing so, addressing the management of this.

**Transparency and Coherence**

Transparency refers to the clarity with which each of the research stages are described in the write-up of the study (Smith et al., 2009). Chapters two and three offer detailed accounts of the method and analysis, further supported by the paper trail provided in the appendices (see appendix 10). The coherence of the study is demonstrated through the consistency between the aims of the research, and the underlying principles of IPA in that the phenomenological and hermeneutic aspects of the study are apparent in the write-up. Furthermore, the reflexivity presented throughout the study, has ensured transparency about internal processes throughout the research process.

**Impact and Importance**

Yardley (2000) argues that, however well or sensitively a research study is conducted, the main criterion by which it must be judged is its impact and utility. It is

hoped that the need for impact and importance has been achieved through the new perspective that the current study has provided; firstly, through the richness of the data which provides an in-depth insight into the lived experiences of female partners of male porn users; secondly, by taking a neutral position, encouraging positive, neutral and negative accounts; and thirdly, by using the findings to provide suggestions for practitioners regarding how to work with this client group.

The existing literature highlights the lack of empirical research available to practitioners and the way in which therapists feel ill-equipped to work with this client group (Ayres & Haddock, 2009). It is hoped that the current study is one that begins to fill this gap and thus may impact curricula development and training in this area. Given that women struggling with issues regarding their male partners' porn use may present to a variety of services, it seems that the findings may be valuable for not only counselling psychologists, but other clinicians including clinical psychologists, counsellors, sex therapists, couple therapists, and family therapists. It is expected that the therapeutic approach adopted by clinicians will reflect their core training and profession, however in terms of the specific elements that training could benefit from addressing, there are four aspects that seem to stand out: (1) taking a non-pathologizing approach (2) validating the female partner's experiences and emotions, (3) understanding the interplay between meaning-making and experience (particularly in relation to perceptions of porn use and internalizing the male partner's porn use), and (4) distinguishing between different sexual behaviours, and exploring individual (and couple, if appropriate) netiquette. Furthermore, those that may be a first point of contact such as GPs, practice nurses, and sexual health workers may also benefit from an awareness of the difficulties that may be faced by this client group and in particular, the importance of taking an open, empathic and non-judgemental approach in order to avoid the commonly reported dismissive and invalidating societal responses which

seem to reflect a view of male porn use as the norm. Given the reports of the participants in the current study regarding the role that support has played in mediating their experiences, in addition to the reports of the challenges with accessing professional support, it would seem that there needs to be more in the way of service provision for this client group. This seems to be of particular importance given the lonely nature of the experiences reported by the participants in the current study. Finally, in relation to counselling psychology training in particular, it seems that the value placed on understanding individuals as relationally embedded might suggest a need for the doctoral training to include teaching regarding couple relationships and the therapeutic approaches that counselling psychologists might adopt in working with couples.

**Further Considerations**

It seems important to consider the factors that may have drawn the six participants to this research, and how this may have influenced the findings. Although many participants spoke of their initial openness to pornography, the dominant narrative was that of the challenging and negative aspects of their experiences. It seems that the interviews perhaps provided the female partners with a space to share their experiences, especially as many had had few previous opportunities to do so. This perhaps further highlights the importance of researching this topic, and the isolation of the participants. In addition, the participants perhaps saw the research as a platform from which they could have their voices heard; as well as wanting to raise awareness both generally in society, and for other women in their situation. It seems that some of the female partners felt that this is an area that has received little attention and thus, they were keen to encourage and support further attention. One might wonder whether a female partner who was indifferent about her male partner's porn use, or who saw it as a positive thing, may have less motivation to partake as

they may have less investment in either sharing their story, or encouraging research and awareness in this area.

It also seems important to acknowledge that, although the study set out to explore experiences of porn use, and attempted to remain true to this throughout the interviews and analysis by maintaining a focus on the research questions, the findings from this study seem to suggest that this difficulty is far more complex than 'porn use'. Indeed, the behaviour of the male partner was rarely limited to porn use and thus the stories shared in the interviews seem to capture a far more complex experience that incorporates not only porn use, but other online and offline sexual behaviours. A more homogenous group in terms of the male partners' behaviours may have yielded a different data set. Also noteworthy is that the participants came from varying cultures meaning that cultural differences between the UK and USA may have evoked different reactions. There was also a significant age range (30-60 years old) which may point to the potential for age and maturity to influence views regarding porn. In addition, the large variation in the duration of the relationships may have influenced how these difficulties were experienced and dealt with. Although I initially had concerns regarding the homogeneity of the sample, the data from the current study suggests that there was significant overlap in the participants' narratives, regardless of these differences. Nevertheless, future research may aim to gain a more homogeneous sample. I was initially concerned by the sample size as the challenges with recruitment precluded me from obtaining the eight participants I had initially hoped for. However, when doing the analysis, I was satisfied that the six interviews had generated enough rich data to work with, and at times, actually felt overwhelmed by the richness of the data and my having to organize it into themes. Perhaps with hindsight, considering the rich accounts yielded from the interviews, the smaller sample allowed the time and reflection required for in-depth analysis which may have been inhibited by a larger dataset (Smith et al., 2009).

Finally, it seems important to acknowledge the nature of IPA which necessarily implicates interpretation, and thus the likelihood that another researcher may have different interpretations of the data. Furthermore, whilst I have strived to capture the experiences of the participants, a question remains as to whether this is ever truly possible.

## Directions for Future Research

The tension arising from the grouping together of various sexual behaviours, highlighted throughout this study, suggests that future research would benefit from focusing on female partners' experiences in relation to specific sexual behaviours rather than grouping them together. By doing so, a better insight may be gained into porn use as a distinct activity, as well as clarity on the female partners' limits of acceptance. The findings suggest that a sense of loss is experienced by female partners, particularly in relation to their idealized perceptions of both their relationship and their male partners – it could be beneficial for future research to provide further insight into this aspect of the experience. The findings also highlight the importance of researchers taking an open approach to understanding various experiences of partners by not limiting samples to negative experiences. It seems from the current study that an equal amount can be learnt from understanding positive and neutral experiences as these provide insight into the aspects that feel manageable in relationships. It also seems that there is a gap in the existing literature regarding the experiences of partners in other types of relationships such as homosexual relationships, or relationships with a female porn user and male partner.

## Conclusion

The aim of the current study was to gain an in-depth understanding of female partners' lived experiences with regards to their male partners' porn use. The study wished to move away from a discourse of pathology to one of understanding the subjective experiences regardless of the presence of diagnosis.

The findings from the current study provide new insights into the female partners' lived experiences. It would seem that ongoing discoveries of their male partners' sexual behaviours increasingly challenged the female partners' limits of acceptance. Whilst their male partner's' use of pornography was within the female partners' limits of acceptance if the male partners were honest about it or if the pornography consumption was mutual; behaviours beyond pornography use consistently seemed to reach the female partners' limits of acceptance. This highlighted the importance of maintaining the distinction between pornography use and other sexual behaviours of a more interactive nature, which had previously been grouped together.

The study suggests a significant interplay between the female partners' meaning-making and their lived experiences. The findings suggest that negative meaning attached to porn use seems to consistently result in shame and embarrassment, and that a tendency for female partners to internalize their male partners' behaviours has a detrimental impact on their confidence and self-esteem. The findings also highlight the lonely nature of this experience for female partners, particularly in relation to the minimizing and dismissive responses received from both their male partners and wider social networks, leaving them feeling isolated and alone. Also highlighted is the way in which the female partners' ability and willingness to seek support is a mediator in the extent of their loneliness. Finally, the study has highlighted the sense of loss in the female partners' narratives. The participants describe the way in which their discoveries brought a realization of the disparity between their initial perceptions of their 'fairy-tale' relationships, and the reality of their relationships now. As such, it seems that the sense of loss is exacerbated by the initial idealized perceptions held by the female partners which gives them further to fall, adding a layer of devastation.

The qualitative design and use of IPA in particular, appears to provide a distinct contribution to this area which currently remains relatively under-researched. Furthermore, the methodological rigour begins to address the lack of empirically based research identified by previous researchers (Ayres & Haddock, 2009). As the number of female partners seeking support for difficulties relating to their partner's porn use increases (Ayres & Haddock, 2009; Goldberg et al., 2008; Hall, 2015; Hentsch-Cowles & Brock, 2013; Wood, 2011), it seems likely that counselling psychologists will encounter this presentation. The findings of the current study can contribute to the awareness and practice of both trainee and qualified counselling psychologists when working with female partners seeking support. Additionally, the findings may provide valuable insight for male porn users and society more generally regarding the lived experiences of female partners.

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## APPENDIX 1: TITLE CHANGE

SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY
uel.ac.uk/psychology
Acting Dean: Professor Rachel Mulvey, BA MA DCG PhD FICG FHEA

UEL University of East London

Date: 05/02/2016

Student number: u1139888

Dear Charlotte,

**Notification of a Change of Thesis Title:**

I am pleased to inform you that the School Research Degree Sub-Committee has approved the change of thesis title. Both the old and new thesis titles are set out below:

**Old thesis title:** When male pornography use is problematic for female partners: The female's subjective experience.

**New thesis title:** Male Pornography Use in Heterosexual Relationships: The Female's Subjective Experience.

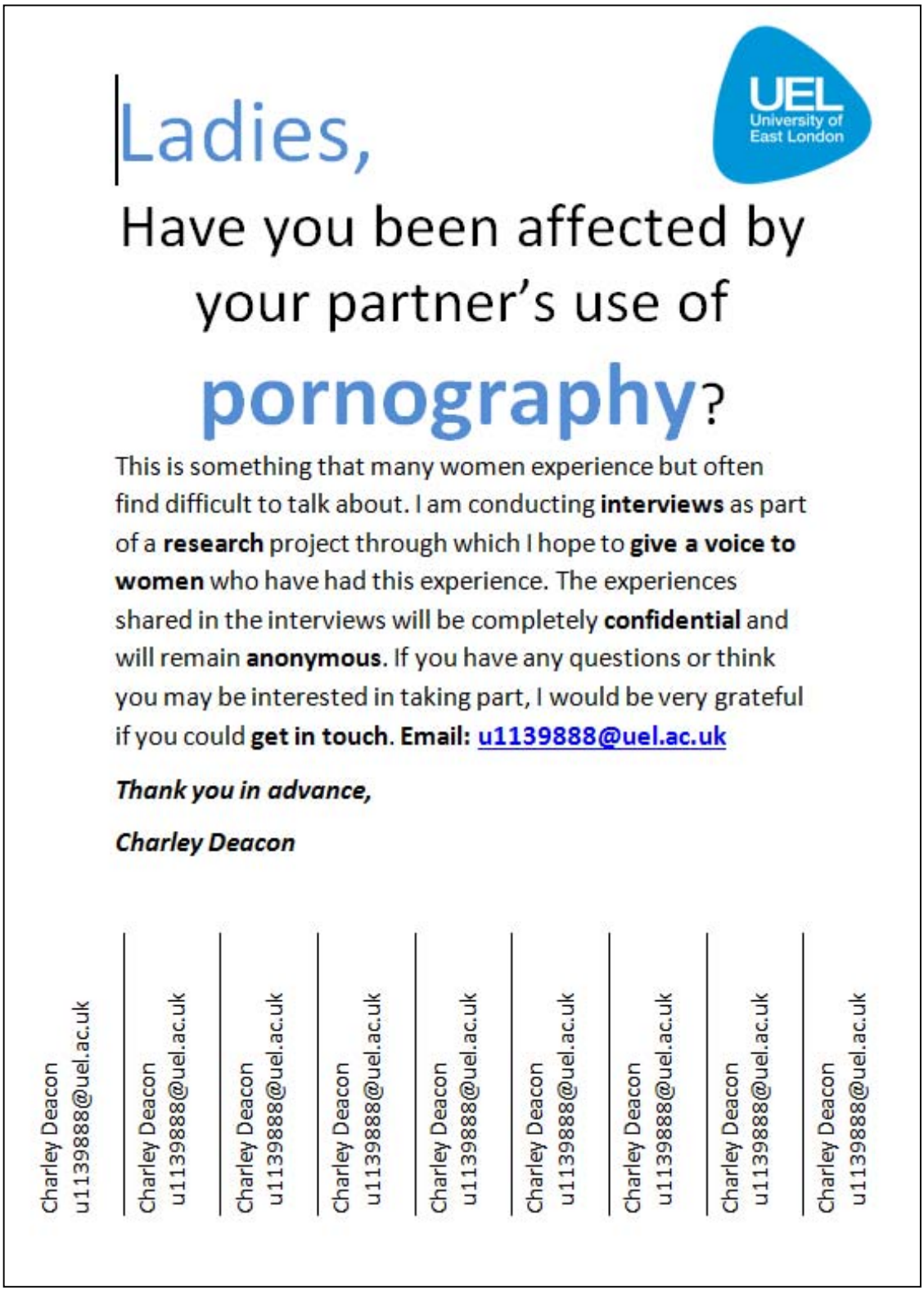
Your registration period remains unchanged. Please contact me if you have any further queries with regards to this matter.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Kenneth Gannon
School Research Degrees Leader
Direct line: 020 8223 4576
Email: k.n.gannon@uel.ac.uk

Stratford Campus, Water Lane, Stratford, London E15 4LZ
Tel: +44 (0)20 8223 4561
Email: m.r.mulvey@uel.ac.uk

**APPENDIX 2: RECRUITMENT POSTER**



## APPENDIX 3: ETHICAL APPROVAL

### NOTICE OF ETHICS REVIEW DECISION

**For research involving human participants**
BSc/MSc/MA/Professional Doctorates in Clinical, Counselling and Educational Psychology

**SUPERVISOR**: Jane Lawrence **REVIEWER: Julia Yates**

**STUDENT:** Charlotte Deacon

**Title of proposed study**: When male pornography use is problematic for female partners: The female's subjective experience.

**Course**: Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology

**DECISION** *(Delete as necessary)*:

*APPROVED

**APPROVED:** Ethics approval for the above named research study has been granted from the date of approval (see end of this notice) to the date it is submitted for assessment/examination.

**APPROVED, BUT MINOR AMENDMENTS ARE REQUIRED BEFORE THE RESEARCH COMMENCES** (see Minor Amendments box below)**:** In this circumstance, re-submission of an ethics application is not required but the student must confirm with their supervisor that all minor amendments have been made before the research commences. Students are to do this by filling in the confirmation box below when all amendments have been attended to and emailing a copy of this decision notice to her/his supervisor for their records. The supervisor will then forward the student's confirmation to the School for its records.

**NOT APPROVED, MAJOR AMENDMENTS AND RE-SUBMISSION REQUIRED** (see Major Amendments box below)**:** In this circumstance, a revised ethics application must be submitted and approved before any research takes place. The revised application will be reviewed by the same reviewer. If in doubt, students should ask their supervisor for support in revising their ethics application.

**Minor amendments required** *(for reviewer)*:

**Major amendments required** *(for reviewer)*:

**Confirmation of making the above minor amendments** *(for students)*:

I have noted and made all the required minor amendments, as stated above, before starting my research and collecting data.

Student's name *(Typed name to act as signature)*:
Student number:

Date:

**ASSESSMENT OF RISK TO RESEACHER** *(for reviewer)*

If the proposed research could expose the researcher to any of kind of emotional, physical or health and safety hazard? Please rate the degree of risk:

- [ ] HIGH
- [ ] MEDIUM
- [x] LOW

*Reviewer comments in relation to researcher risk (if any)*:

**Reviewer** *(Typed name to act as signature)*: Julia Yates

**Date**: 16th September 2015

*This reviewer has assessed the ethics application for the named research study on behalf of the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee (moderator of School ethics approvals)*

**PLEASE NOTE:**
*For the researcher and participants involved in the above named study to be covered by UEL's insurance and indemnity policy, prior ethics approval from the School of Psychology (acting on behalf of the UEL Research Ethics Committee), and confirmation from students where minor amendments were required, must be obtained before any research takes place.

*For the researcher and participants involved in the above named study to be covered by UEL's insurance and indemnity policy, travel approval from UEL (not the School of Psychology) must be gained if a researcher intends to travel overseas to collect data, even if this involves the researcher travelling to his/her home country to conduct the research. Application details can be found here: http://www.uel.ac.uk/gradschool/ethics/fieldwork/

## APPENDIX 4: INFORMATION SHEET

**Information Sheet**

Dear Reader,

I am a trainee Counselling Psychologist at the University of East London conducting a research study exploring the experiences of women whose partners have been engaged in pornography use. The aim in conducting this research is to give a voice to females whose partners are, or have been, engaged in pornography use, and to raise awareness of the impact that pornography use can have on female partners. It is also hoped that this research will inform clinical practice so that, when females seek help in therapeutic settings in relation to their partners' pornography use, therapists are in a better position to provide support.

In order to conduct this study, I will be interviewing females who have, at some point, been in a cohabiting relationship with a male partner who is /was engaged in pornography use. It does not matter how long ago the experience was, or whether or not you are still in that relationship. Should you decide to participate in the study, we will arrange an interview which will last between 1 and 1 ½ hours. During the interview you will be asked to talk about your experience of your partner's pornography use and the impact that this has had on you. At the end of the interview, if you wish to talk further, I will be happy to direct you to relevant support/counselling organizations. The interviews will take place at the University of East London in Stratford or, if difficult for you to get to, at a location more convenient for you. If meeting in person is not possible due to distance, we can do an interview using Skype. The interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed with all potentially identifying details removed. The recordings will be destroyed after transcribing. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time and may do so without disadvantage to yourself and without any obligation to give a reason.

With regards to the potential risks and benefits of taking part – you may find it interesting and helpful to talk about your experience, and reflecting on what these experiences mean to you may lead to new insights. This can be seen as a risk as well as a benefit. Talking about such personal experiences can also involve difficult feelings so it is therefore important that you think carefully about your feelings around taking part in this research and possibly discuss it with a close friend or relative.

If you think that you would like to take part in this study or have any questions you can contact me by e-mail at u1139888@uel.ac.uk.

If you have any questions or concerns about how the study has been conducted, please contact the study's supervisor: Jane Lawrence, School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ. (Tel: 020 8223 4993. Email: j.lawrence@uel.ac.uk)

or

Chair of the School of Psychology Research Ethics Sub-committee: Dr. Mark Finn, School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ. (Tel: 020 8223 4493. Email: m.finn@uel.ac.uk)

Thank you in anticipation.

Kind regards,

Charley Deacon
Counselling Psychologist in Training

## APPENDIX 5: CONSENT FORM

**Consent Form**

Consent to participate in research study:

Male Pornography Use in Heterosexual Relationships: The Female's Subjective Experience

I have the read the information sheet relating to the above research study and have been given a copy to keep. The nature and purposes of the research have been explained to me, and I have had the opportunity to discuss the details and ask questions about this information. I understand what is being proposed and the procedures in which I will be involved have been explained to me.

I understand that my involvement in this study, and particular data from this research, will remain strictly confidential. Only the researcher involved in the study will have access to identifying data. It has been explained to me what will happen once the research study has been completed.

I hereby freely and fully consent to participate in the study which has been fully explained to me. Having given this consent I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without disadvantage to myself and without being obliged to give any reason. I also understand that should I withdraw, the researcher reserves the right to use my anonymous data in the write-up of the study and in any further analysis that may be conducted by the researcher.

Participant's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

Participant's Signature

Researcher's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

Charley Deacon

Researcher's Signature

Charley Deacon

Date: .....

## APPENDIX 6: PRE-INTERVIEW

I just want to tell you a little bit about the interview so that you know what to expect and to hopefully help you to feel as comfortable as possible. What I'm really interested in is you and your experience, there are no right or wrong answers. It might feel like quite a one-sided conversation as I won't be saying very much, that's because I really want to hear about your story. Some of the questions might seem a bit obvious but that's because I want to get an idea of how ***you*** understand things, I don't want to be making any assumptions. Don't feel like you have to rush, feel free to take your time in thinking and talking. Sometimes there might be little breaks between us talking and that's fine as well, it's just time for us to gather our thoughts. If at any point you're finding it difficult or want to take a break that is absolutely fine, just let me know.

## APPENDIX 7: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Age:

When did the relationship that has led you to take part in this research begin?

If the relationship has ended, when did the relationship end?

When did you discover your partner's pornography use?

Do you have children with this partner? Or any other children?

1. I'd like to begin by building a picture of the relationship that's brought you here today. Can you tell me a bit about your relationship with this partner?
    a. How did you meet?
    b. Are you still together?
    c. What was the relationship like (before/after)?

2. How did you come to know about your partner's pornography use?
    a. What did you make of that?
    b. What was your reaction to that?
    c. What did you think?
    d. How was that for you? How did you feel?
    e. How did you deal with it? What did you do?
    f. Can you give me an example of a time when you felt/noticed/did that?

3. What impact, if any, did this have on the way you saw/see yourself?
    a. How did this experience affect how you thought and felt about yourself?
    b. What did it mean to you that your partner was using pornography?
    c. What did it mean about you that your partner was using pornography?
    d. Did your view of yourself change as a result of this experience?
    e. Can you give me an example of a time when....
    f. Was this the first time you were experiencing these thoughts/feelings?

4. If at all, can you tell me how this affected the way you saw your partner?
    a. What did you think it meant about your partner that he was using pornography?
    b. Did your view of your partner change as a result of this experience?
    c. How did you feel about your partner?

5. If at all, how did/has this impact(ed) your relationship?
    a. Did you notice any changes in your relationship?
    b. Any changes in how you felt about your relationship?
    c. What did your relationship look like to the outsider?

6. How has this experience impacted your view on the use of pornography, if at all?
    a. Views before? After? Now?
    b. (After therapy?)

If they've sought help:

7. How have you experienced the help you've received?
    a. Has anything changed for you as a result?

If they haven't sought help:

8. Have you ever thought about getting support for this experience?
    a. Why?
    b. What sort of help might you like?

9. Finally, I wondered what would you say is important to you in a relationship?
    a. Has this changed as a result of your experience?
    b. What are your thoughts and feelings on intimate relationships in the future?

## APPENDIX 8: TRANSCRIPT EXTRACT

P: Yeah. The last e-mail I found, and who knows, but it went back to 2006 so whether anything happened before then I don't know (I: mmmm) but he'd... [Julie sighs] yeah

I: So what was happening for you in that moment when you discovered all of that?

P: Er, I just felt erm, I remember walking to town I just had to get out of the house, er, uh, I just felt awful, I just felt sick and then mixes of things really, then I felt so angry at how could he do this to us? and then just this feeling of despair and thinking well that's it, I I can't forgive this, you know, I knew really that was the end, (I: yeah) erm because of the betrayal and erm the lies and the and the impact on me I mean it was, yes, taken, I mean this was 2011 this was 2012 erm, and it's taken until now to begin to feel and I've had, I'm so lucky because I've had so much help I really have (I: yeah) I can't...yeah, erm but it was, yeah it was just really knocked me, I just felt worthless, I felt, my esteem went, my confidence went, erm and I'm very, I get on very well with my boss at work so I I actually told her everything (I: yeah) and er she, said well what do you think, but actually at work it was the one place where I still felt confident, I put on my uniform, I could distract myself with you know other people's, my patients' problems (I: mmmm) erm so I never actually had any time off sick, I kept going because that that helped me so much (I: yeah) erm, so Jeff moved, I asked him to move out eventually he did, er, I think he thought there was still hope and he, he just couldn't he couldn't get into his head what he'd done, I mean he said erm this is the quote that was used actually when I went on that course erm, he said to me can we not just forget this silly business and I said 'Jeff, have you any idea what you've done' and of course erm, you know, for his his daughters who are, when all this happened were sort of, what would they be, oh Jess would be 18 Rosie would be 24 and then other things have come to light of course since [Julie takes a deep

breath and clears her throat] it all came out in the open that the girls had occasionally come across him, erm, well one time they actually saw him [inaudible] holidays and that's why I think he wanted to stay in the villa so much but he he'd been watching porn on the hotel... TV in the villa (I: mmmm) er watching porn on that erm and they both, they didn't say anything because they couldn't really believe it so they didn't say anything to me but then Rosie way back in France when she was sort of just going into puberty and this makes you feel quite sick but Jeff had obviously been looking at her and he'd said to her I think you'd better tidy up down there meaning you know, with her swimsuit on she was showing a bit of pubic hair (I: yeah) well, you know, [Julie exhales] I felt, uh, that that was awful, Rosie's only just told me that and I thought well how much was he looking at them, you know, because really, you know, anyone else I wouldn't imagine would've said to me 'look Julie' if you if he had noticed that you you wouldn't say it directly to the...because Rosie was absolutely mortified you know, so embarrassed that her father would...yeah so erm

I: And what did that bring up in you?

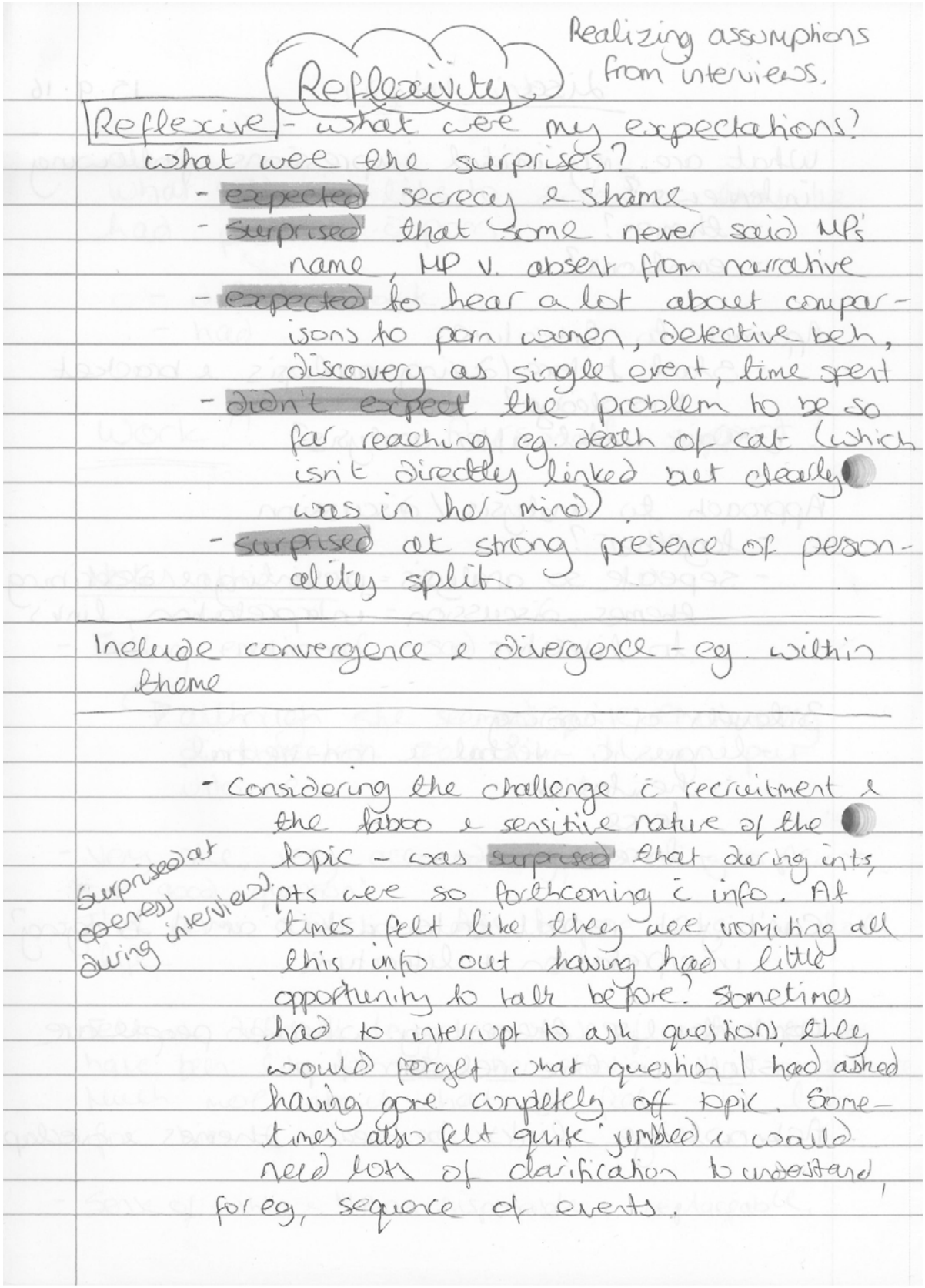
P: Er...sort of revulsion really and worry for my daughters and thinking, you know, as they were obviously maturing, you know...what sort of sense had he been looking at them in, you know, because he just, as a dad you don't think of that sort of at all do you erm...I mean the whole thing has been so hard for them because, you know, well you don't think of your parents having sex do you (I: no), you know, to have all this [Julie inhales deeply] you know [Julie exhales] to have to, because in the end I mean I was quite open with them and I thought you know I was so sick of all the lies I just thought I'd I'm going to be quite, especially as Rosie was at home and then Jess actually moved back home, she gave up uni 'cos it had really affected her erm, I think probably as well because she'd she

has been for counselling, Rosie has never didn't want it but I think because Jess had known for so long what was going on erm and hadn't said anything (I: mmmm) and hadn't told her friends hadn't told anybody erm yeah so erm so they've been we've become a very close threesome really (I: yeah) erm as they've been at home and they've, you know I said to them they were they said 'don't tell anybody Mum' and I said 'well I'm sorry but I've got to talk it through so I'm only going to tell my very close friends [Julie clears her throat] which I did...and everyone everyone was absolutely shell-shocked they just thought [surprised tone] 'Jeff, doing that' erm the people I told (I: yeah) them but then for people who didn't know because obviously once we split up erm the tale was he'd had an affair but people were quite surprised at that really and they said 'if anyone Julie we'd have thought of the two of you it would've been you who'd gone off not him' and then people said 'but we just saw you the other day you looked, you were walking along holding hands' and so I had quite a few people who couldn't accept it and sort of quiz me erm, so I just had to you know stick to my story that yes he had met somebody else, erm

I: And what what made you say that, that he'd met somebody else?

P: [Pause] well, I don't know I think you're just so embarrassed and ashamed really and you know just [Julie inhales deeply] I mean at that point I I think there was a bit of that there was also very much wanting to protect the girls because they were so horrified they said 'oh Mum we can't bear anyone knowing what Dad's really done' erm as time's gone on now I've noticed they've told me they've told more people (I: yeah) and certainly I have as well because I think the rawness you know we've all settled and erm, yeah but at the beginning it was erm, and I stopped going into town I did my shopping elsewhere I just couldn't face bumping into anybody erm

**APPENDIX 9: EXTRACT FROM REFLEXIVITY JOURNAL**



Realizing assumptions from interviews.

Reflexivity

Reflexive - what were my expectations? what were the surprises?

- expected secrecy & shame
- surprised that some never said MPs name, MP v. absent from narrative
- expected to hear a lot about comparisons to porn women, detective beh, discovery as single event, time spent
- didn't expect the problem to be so far reaching eg. death of cat (which isn't directly linked but clearly was in her mind)
- surprised at strong presence of personality split.

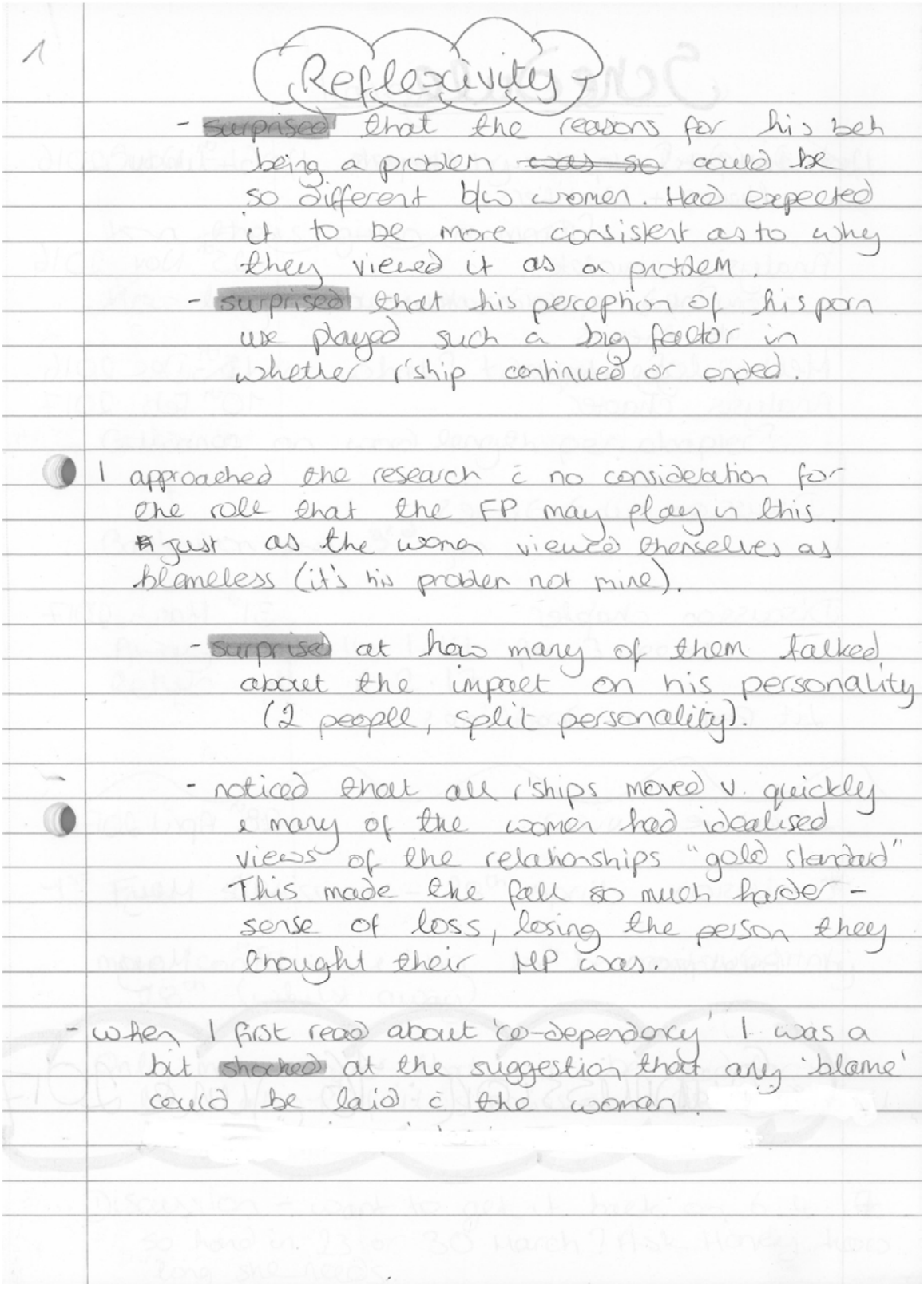
---

Include convergence & divergence - eg. within theme

---

- Considering the challenge in recruitment & the taboo & sensitive nature of the topic - was surprised that during ints, pts were so forthcoming in info. At times felt like they were vomiting all this info out having had little opportunity to talk before. Sometimes had to interrupt to ask questions, they would forget what question I had asked having gone completely off topic. Sometimes also felt quite jumbled & could need lots of clarification to understand, for eg, sequence of events.

(Surprised at openness during interviews)



1

Reflexivity

- surprised that the reasons for his beh being a problem ~~was so~~ could be so different b/w women. Had expected it to be more consistent as to why they viewed it as a problem.
- surprised that his perception of his porn use played such a big factor in whether r'ship continued or ended.

I approached the research c no consideration for the role that the FP may play in this. Just as the women viewed themselves as blameless (it's his problem not mine).

- surprised at how many of them talked about the impact on his personality (2 people, split personality).

- noticed that all r'ships moved v. quickly & many of the women had idealised views of the relationships "gold standard" This made the fall so much harder - sense of loss, losing the person they thought their HP was.

- when I first read about 'co-dependency' I was a bit shocked at the suggestion that any 'blame' could be laid c the women.

## APPENDIX 10: EXAMPLE OF ANALYSIS PAPER TRAIL

# Interview with Melissa (skype)

Interviewer introduces participant to the interview and the study.

I: So the first question is just to build up sort of an idea of your relationship just quite generally so how you met, whether or not you're still together, what your relationship's like, just a sort of introduction to the relationship

P: OK, well we grew up in the same neighbourhood, we rode the same school bus, I met him when I was 10 years old (I: mmmk). Erm, we were friends and when I was about 13 I realised I had developed a crush on him (I: mhmm), he's 3 years older than me (I: OK) and by the time I was 16 I felt like I was in love him but we were still, we were just friends (I: mmmk) and we remained friends, he graduated, he went off to the marines but since his family lived in the same neighbourhood as mine I saw him every time he was down. Erm...I got out of high school, I got married, I had 2 kids, he had gotten out of the marines, he got married, he had 2 kids, we both had erm, horrible first marriages, got divorced and then we reconnected, he actually found me through a website called [website name] (I: OK) and he'd sent me an e-mail, we started talking and within, I would say, I think it was 9 or 10 months (I: mhmm), we got married (I: OK). So it was boom boom boom boom boom. That was in 2000 (I: mhmm). So we've been together, married since 2000 (I: OK). And yeah, what else was the, was there something else?

I: Just like, the relationship more generally, how has it been?

P: We were the best of friends, we had a great relationship, we never fought, ever, maybe once a year (I: mhmm) and...it was very erm, I thought it was completely fate, you know, and that he was truly my soul mate. We got along so well (I: mhmm) we had so much in common erm, my kids were 1 and 4 when we got married and he took over the role of Dad immediately, and their biological, when we

Sounds like something from a fairytale / movie.

Fairytale relationship.

r'ship moved v. quickly.

married very quickly.

(Fantasy) construction of r'ship.

construction of relationship as perfect.

29 divorced, he kind of just dropped away (I: OK) so he was it for them,
30 and his kids would come and stay with us, we integrated all really
31 really well. The relationship was great (I: mhmm), erm

32 I: So is this kind of going back to when you first got married,
33 you're talking about?

34 P: I would say for the first 5 years (I: OK) it was, it was really truly
35 like a dream come true for me. It was really really great and, to him
36 too (I: mhmm) and we worked together for a while and people would
37 say 'how can you live together and work together?' We got along, we
38 truly were best friends (I: mhmm) and in my opinion, and my belief,
39 we had no secrets. Erm, about a year after we had been together, I
40 had found some kind of pornography magazine in the back of his
41 truck (I: mmmk) and confronted him with it, erm, he gave me the
42 typical guy response, 'no big deal, all guys look, blah blah blah.' I told
43 him I didn't like it, I told him it made me feel bad, that I had issues
44 with it from my childhood and growing up, and to me, it was
45 cheating. So he said "ok, you know, it's not a big deal" (I: OK). And
46 then over the years, every once in a while, I would, I would see
47 something on the computer, and still, same thing, 'I really didn't
48 think it was that big of a deal.' It wasn't until last year it all blew up.
49 But up until, in my opinion, as the years have gone on, things, life
50 takes over, he lost his youngest son (I: yeah) in 2012, and that was
51 horrible and he has struggled with depression ever since then (I:
52 mmmm) and so, over the last few years, the disconnect that has,
53 what I now look back on in hindsight, I thought it was all from that,
54 and I'm sure it had a lot to do with that, I'm sure that that really
55 made the addiction become even worse (I: mhmm) but, yeah, up
56 until a few years ago, I, in my opinion we had a wonderful marriage

57 I: Mmmk. So you discovered magazines a year in, told him you
58 didn't like it, it wasn't really that much of a big deal but occasionally
59 it would crop back up again (P: right) until a couple of years ago

# Melissa Themes & Identifiers

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **1. Attitude to porn use** | | |
| FP's hatred of porn | 42 | I told him I didn't like it, I told him it made me feel bad, that I had issues with it from my childhood and growing up, and to me, it was cheating |
| | 572 | my entire life, I have had a problem with porn, it was responsible for being molested, it was responsible for my dad leaving, you know, it, so yeah, I've always had issues with it |
| | 575 | my thoughts on it haven't changed at all, I've always hated it and I still do, in fact I probably hate it more. No, I *do*, I for sure, I hate it more, I hate it way more now |
| Influence of childhood experiences | 559 | between the ages of 3 and 5, erm, I was molested by an older brother, erm, at age 7, my parents got a divorce, at age 11 my dad died, somewhere between this time, my mom had told me that my brother had found my father's porn magazines, and that's the reason why he molested me, he was trying to act out what he saw in those magazines |
| | 566 | one of the reasons why [dad] had cheated on [mum] is because he was *obsessed* with all of his porn mags |
| **2. Meanings attached to male partner's behaviour** | | |
| Cheating | 103 | *her* seeing *her* and reading the messages between *them two* just, for me, at that moment, topped it off. |
| | 569 | there's a scripture about if someone lusts after another person, that is God's eyes they've already committed adultery. And [mum] drilled that into my head. |
| | 592 | every time that I did find it, it felt like I had just found out he cheated on me, it felt like he had just betrayed me |

beyond watching

discovery of porn use

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | 601 | it is very much still like, erm, cheating, regardless of he had actually physically done it or not, I still would have felt like he had cheated on me, it just became way worse |
| Male partner's secrecy/lies/deceit = loss of trust | 90 | I realised he had another e-mail account |
| | 109 | But he swore to me he had, he did not physically cheat |
| | 308 | he had been putting on airs trying to convince other people what a great guy he was, so now, like, 'you're so fake, you...you've been fake not only with me, but to everybody else, the entire world of people that you know.' |
| | 312 | I don't have any faith in him anymore, I don't have any trust in him |
| | 347 | I don't believe hardly anything that he says, and I feel like, he's messing with me. 9 times out of 10, if he's nice I feel like, I feel like it's a set up |
| | 425 | he played his part, in you know, making sure that everybody had no doubts about that with the stuff that, like on Facebook his posts and stuff |
| Internalizing | 191 | then it started flipping to er, the reasons why, and it wasn't just porn, it was because he was unsatisfied, and he was unhappy, and he was this and he was that and I had given up on the marriage and I had...all of the blame, all of the blame started coming in |
| | 268 | I found you know, perfect bodies you know, fitness models, that's not me. And...if that's what he wanted, if that's what he found attractive and that doesn't look like me, then where does that leave me? |
| | 271 | the fact that he had that physical affair meant that he chose someone else, over me |
| | 273 | Those were the blows (I: yeah), blows to the ego and to the self esteem |

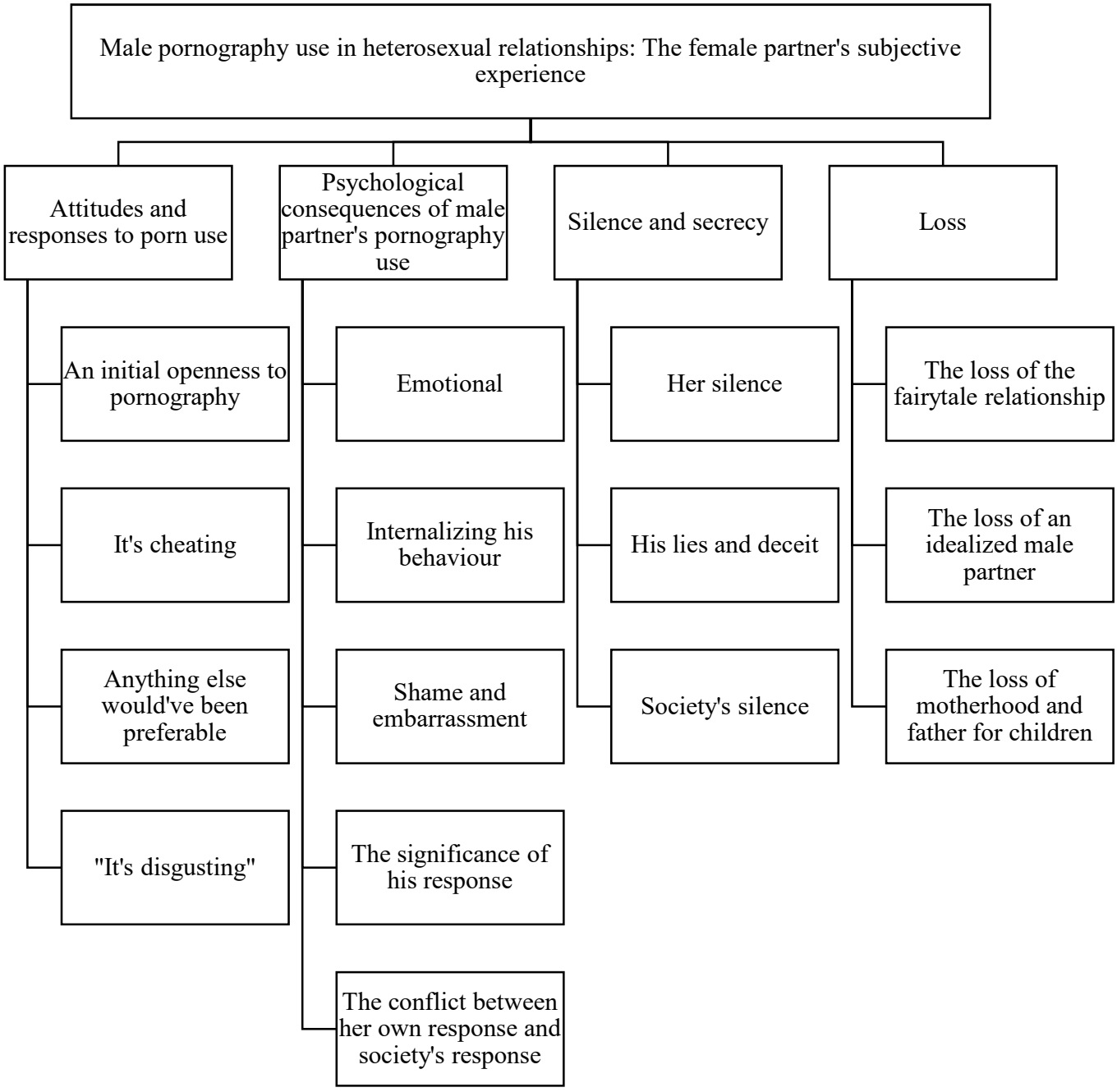
FP m-m about self

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | 277 | I felt he, he turned to porn cause I wasn't good enough...I wasn't attractive, I wasn't desirable. I felt like he must think I'm ugly and he must not love me. So...ultimately I felt ugly, unlovable, unwanted, replaceable, discardable and and overall just less-than |
| Male partner breaking the relationship rules | 217 | my first husband cheated on me, and his first wife cheated on him. That was one of our common, you know, bonds, that was one of our common...'I would never do that to you' things |
| | 319 | I have only had eyes for you for so long, but you've had eyes for *so* many other people |
| | 659 | Trust and honesty, yeah, trust honesty, I mean they go hand in hand and support, erm, emotional support for both people. The trust is huge, huge. Cause without it you doubt everything, so I think that's probably my number one thing |
| FP's embarrassment and shame resulting in her own secrecy | 429 | hardly anybody knows about it |
| | 461 | It's embarrassing because of the relationship we had and were perceived as having. |
| | 462 | It's embarrassing because a lot of people, most people, don't understand pornography addiction [...] and I don't want to explain myself and I don't want to have anybody defend it as 'but it's just porn, all guys look at porn.' |
| | 502 | it's that shame and that embarrassment, you know, not only for the relationship that people have belief that we had and that I believe that we had, but because of the subject, because of the porn. It's, you know, it's dirty, it's dirty. And the stuff that he saw, the stuff that he, the stuff that he wanted to do, was....not stuff that I want other people to know |
| **3. Loss** | | |

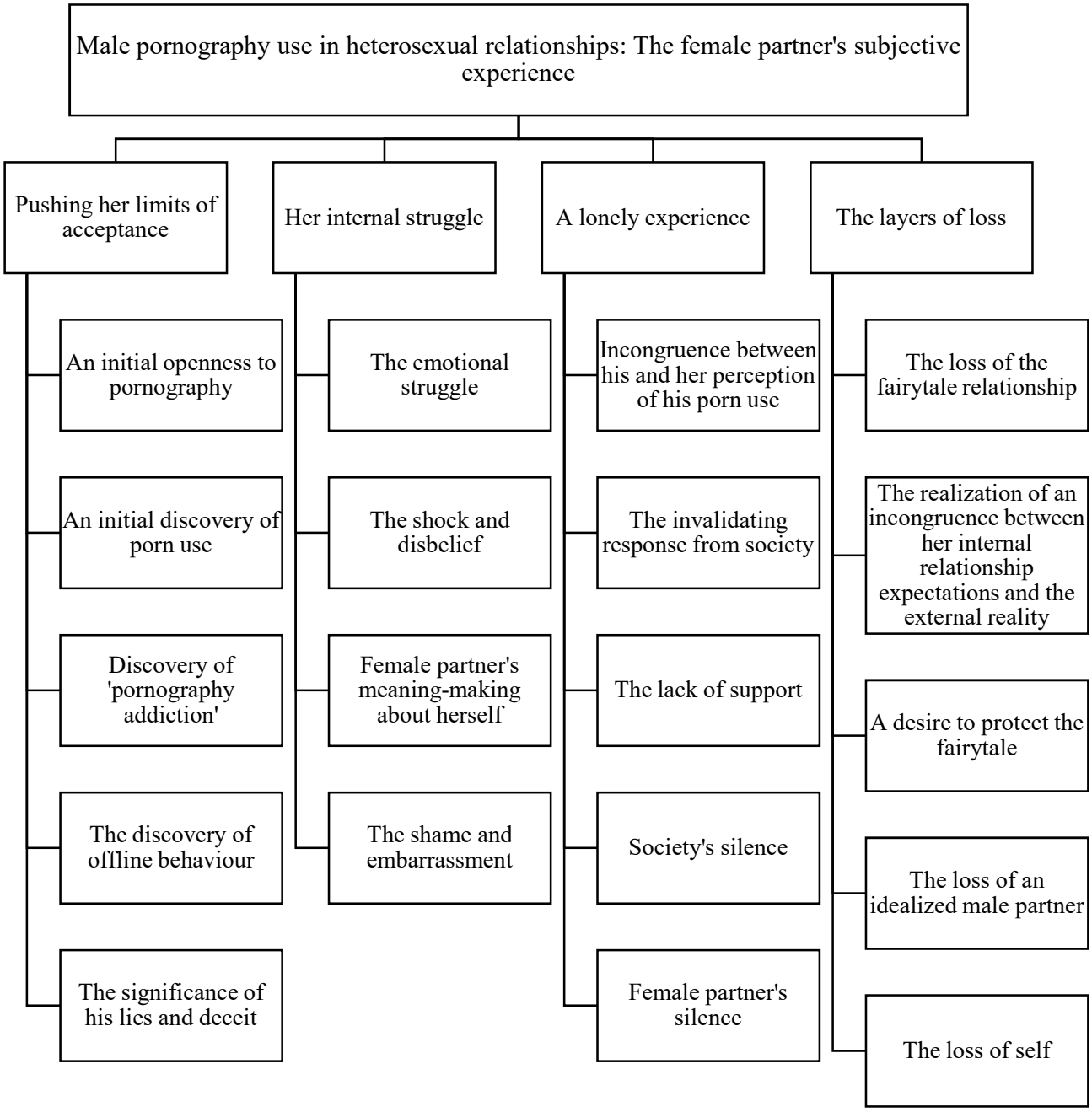
| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Self | 209 | Oh...[sighs] ...it has destroyed the self that I was. It has destroyed that person. I'm going to have to, and I've been trying to rebuild myself basically from ground up |
| | 211 | My self-esteem went away, completely |
| | 213 | it made me doubt myself, because how could I be so close to someone, know someone so well, and they were doing all of this behind my back, without me knowing. So what's wrong with me? |
| | 292 | I didn't know who I was, I I felt trapped, and I felt less than, and...the view of myself was just *so* dark and *so* horrible, so self-loathing |
| Male partner | 96 | I was like, 'who is this person?! Who is this person?!' |
| | 141 | he all of a sudden became a stranger, and enemy, a person that [sighs] I didn't recognise, the things that he was looking at, talking about, that wasn't the guy that I knew |
| | 299 | I have a hard time with him now, sometimes I look at him and I'm, I'm like, 'I don't know what's real and what's not real, with you, because damn you were *good* at living a double life, very very good at hiding stuff' |
| | 404 | I love him (I: mhmm) and I hate him. Er, I can remember the him that I knew and then I remember the him that I know now |
| Fairytale relationship | 5 | we grew up in the same neighbourhood, we rode the same school bus, I met him when I was 10 years old [...] when I was about 13 I realised I had developed a crush on him [...] by the time I was 16 I felt like I was in love him |
| | 23 | We were the best of friends, we had a great relationship, we never fought [...] it was completely fate [...] he was truly my soul mate [...] We got along so well, we had so much in common. The relationship was great (31) |

## APPENDIX 11: DEVELOPMENT OF THEMES

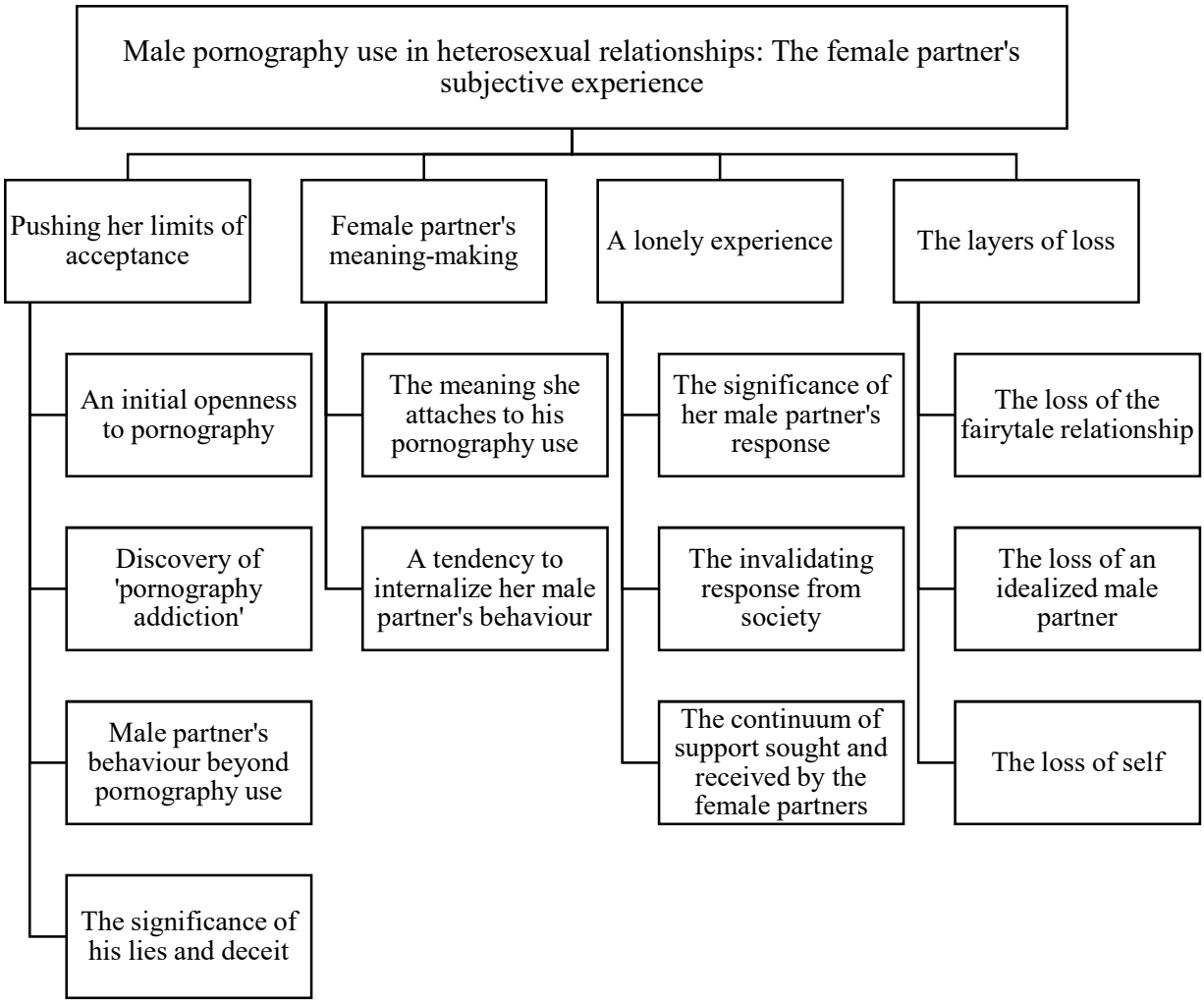
Version 1 - 25.11.2016



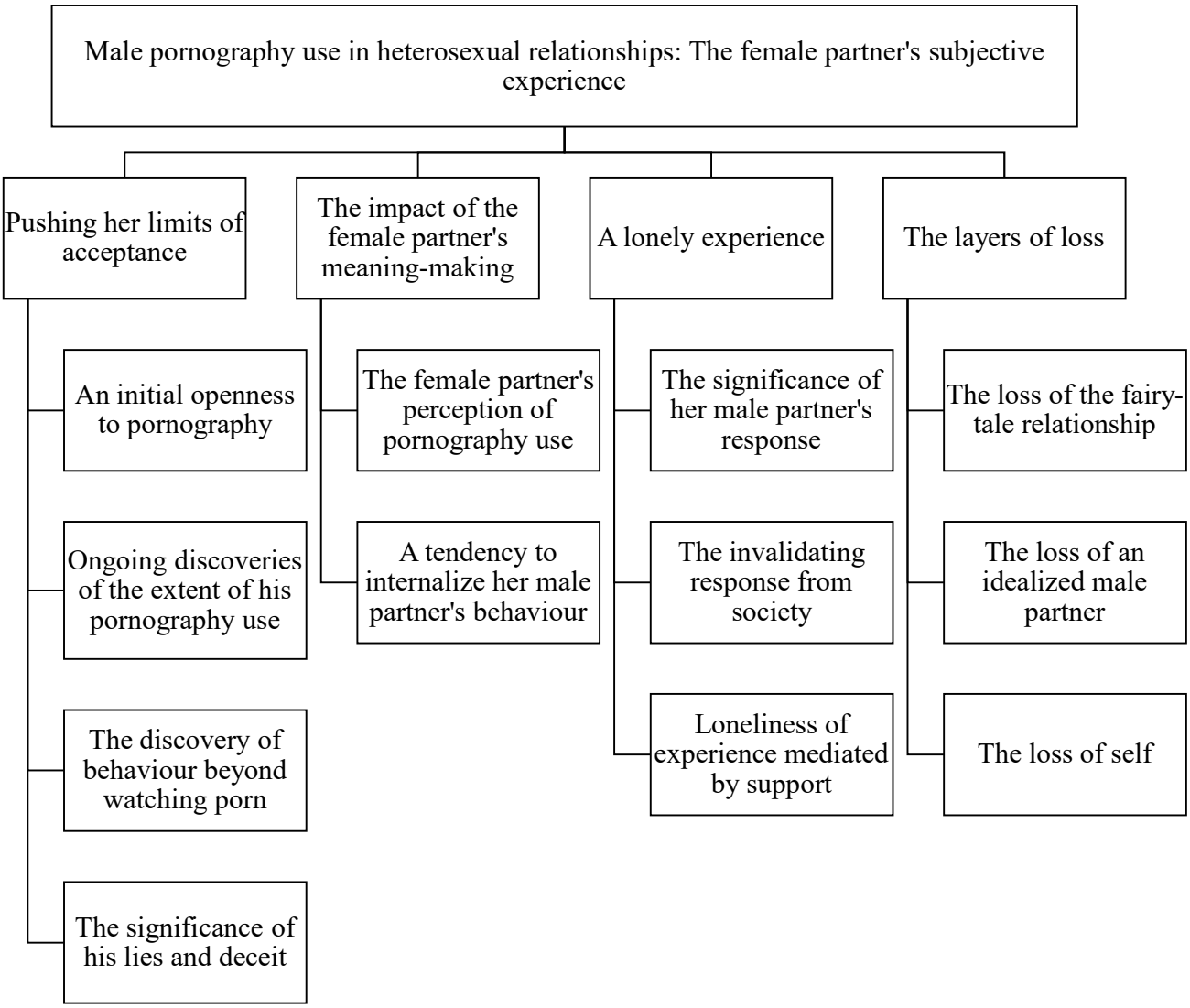
Version 2 – 11.01.2017



Version 3 – 23.02.2017



Version 4 – 16.03.2017



## APPENDIX 12: THEME FREQUENCY TABLE

| Theme | Julie | Hannah | Sophia | Melissa | Jade | Carrie | Half of participants? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Pushing her limits of acceptance: The ongoing discoveries** | | | | | | | |
| "In the early days we watched porn together": An initial openness to pornography | No | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| ""I'm sorry, I've got a porn addiction" he actually said those words": Ongoing discoveries of the extent of his porn use | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes |
| "That was the point of no return": The discovery of behaviour beyond watching porn | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | Yes |
| "If he'd just been honest about it…": The significance of his lies and deceit | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| **The impact of the female partner's meaning-making** | | | | | | | |
| "It's, you know, it's dirty, it's dirty": The female partner's perception of pornography use | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| "I just thought I wasn't good enough...so he'd gone elsewhere": A tendency to internalize her male partner's behaviour | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **A lonely experience** | | | | | | | |
| "He just didn't grasp the significance of what he'd done": The significance of her male partner's response | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | No | No | Yes |
| "What's the problem? He's a bloke. Get over it!": The invalidating response from society | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | Yes |
| "For a real long time I didn't tell anyone. I felt very lonely in it all": Loneliness of experience mediated by support | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | Yes |
| **The layers of loss** | | | | | | | |
| "It was a fairytale, it was meant to be. And so now I know there are no fairytales": The loss of the fairy-tale relationship | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | No | Yes |
| "This knight in shining armour, to me, now was just a f***ing liar": The loss of an idealized male partner | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| "The biggest casualty of all of this would be losing myself": The loss of self | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes |

## APPENDIX 13: ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTES TABLE

Master Theme 1 – Pushing her limits of acceptance: The ongoing discoveries

| Sub-theme | Participant | Line number | Quote |
|---|---|---|---|
| "In the early days we watched porn together": An initial openness to pornography | Hannah | 44 | I was taking the piss out of him 'cause he'd been looking at porn...because it wasn't an issue, it really wasn't |
| | Hannah | 625 | I read dirty books so that's the same but it's not on tele |
| | Hannah | 455 | I suggested that we look at it together and he was like "no way no way no way" |
| | Hannah | 436 | when you're not in the house I'm doing stuff to me, it's not a problem, it doesn't make me not want to have sex with you |
| | Sophia | 244 | I really did try my best erm to do something about it first, to talk to him to get him to open up with him, and I even told him, "listen, I have nothing against the porn, we can watch together, I don't mind" |
| | Jade | 418 | in the early days in our relationship we watched porn together |
| | Carrie | 308 | I wanted to know, I wanted him to show me what kind of stuff he was looking at, and what happened was I was there with him and I was naked and he was showing me on the computer you know, it was kind of a "let's look at this together" type of thing (I: mhmm) and his eyes glued to the screen. |
| | Carrie | 172 | to, really to my shock, I cannot tell you how shocked I was, when he really openly said I've had a lifelong problem with porn...because after my first husband who hid ***everything***, I couldn't believe it, Charley. I just, I was ***blown away***...that this guy was gonna be honest about it |
| | Carrie | 199 | It was those three things [that made me feel safe]: wouldn't abandon me, was willing to be honest, and wasn't interactive in his sexual |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | acting out |
| | Carrie | 289 | It didn't shock me because I think by then I had lost some of the innocence, naivety sense that you know, I guess I'd adopted the kind of cultural "all guys do that" attitude. Erm, I think I paid more attention to the fact that he was willing to talk about it than the substance of it itself |
| | Carrie | 576 | I figured if he identifies with [being a sex addict], who am I to argue? I didn't really have any trouble accepting that |
| ""I'm sorry, I've got a porn addiction" he actually said those words": The ongoing discovery of the extent of his porn use | Julie | 331 | he said 'I've lost my job' and I was absolutely gobsmacked I said 'what?' ... he gave a list of reasons ... and then of course he let the bombshell drop and he said erm 'well also I've been viewing' he said 'I've been viewing pornography at work' so that absolutely [Julia sighs] uh, just felt sick (I: yeah) I said 'what?!' |
| | Hannah | 150 | ...he came in and he said "I'm sorry, I've got a porn addiction" he actually said those words, **that** I wasn't expecting **at all** [emboldened to reflect Hannah's emphasis] ...when he said "I have a porn addiction" he took the wind out of me |
| | Hannah | 153 | when he said "I have a porn addiction" and he took the wind out of me and I was like "what the fuck, what the fuck does that mean, do you want to do that instead of being with me? |
| | Hannah | 299 | it was *every* day and the *stuff,* I mean it was very varied it was fucking disgusting, erm, but there was, there was *so* much |
| | Hannah | 321 | it showed me how bad it was you know, it wasn't like once a week when I was out with a mate, it was every opportunity that I wasn't there he was looking and it made, it made me feel that that, that that was more important than me |
| | Hannah | 289 | I tidied up the kitchen, I got the laptop and I, I clicked to close erm, the recipe, and behind it was another screen open, with porn on it, and I was like [high pitched] "what the fuck". So I then went into the history and it showed, you |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | know, ever time he'd logged on and he, and it was months and months and months and months and months |
| | Hannah | 304 | And I mean, I felt *sick*, I nearly was sick |
| | Hannah | 306 | Simon came to bed and I just didn't want him to touch me or anything because I just felt so hurt |
| | Melissa | 592 | every time that I did find it, it felt like I had just found out he cheated on me, it felt like he had just betrayed me |
| | Melissa | 583 | I hated the fact that he was a porn addict, that I was finding that out, but, I thought there's hope, there's therapy, you know, he hasn't, he hasn't totally shattered the glass |
| | Melissa | 110 | he told me he had a problem, told me he was addicted to porn |
| | Melissa | 113 | I had no idea anybody could *be* addicted to porn. And I thought, 'that's an excuse, you're making an excuse for why you keep doing this, and I don't wanna hear it because that's bullshit, I'm not listening to that, you're doing it cause you wanna do it, clearly' |
| | Melissa | 118 | I started doing research and, found out it is real, an addiction is addiction and it changes the brain and it rewires the brain, it's all the same, doesn't matter what the drug is |
| | Melissa | 122 | I thought well we can, we can work through this, we can get through this, go to counselling, he can get help |
| | Jade | 146 | he just said to me one day that he thought he had a problem with porn, and, to be honest with you I thought that that wasn't really a thing, you know, I'm not, I don't, I hadn't until that point thought that porn could be an issue |
| | Jade | 689 | Of all things to get addicted to, I mean, I I guess I am a bit prudish anyway and I always have been but of all things, I think I would have preferred it if he was addicted drugs or alcohol because you know, sex, really?! Pornography, I just think it's disgusting, it makes you think of you know, lonely old men that do flashing and |

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| | | | [laughs] you know, the, yeah....yeah it doesn't make me view him in a very favourable light at all |
| "That was the point of no return": The discovery of behaviour beyond watching porn | Julie | 441 | then Jess piped up and I said 'well dad's you know well he's lost his job, he's been viewing pornography and but that's all it's been and erm' because, again, you know, Jeff had said very convincingly 'oh I could never go through with it Julie, I've never met anybody, I've only ever viewed and I feel awful and da-dee-da' and then Jess just said 'well it's a bit more than that dad isn't it' and er, I just looked at her and said 'what do you mean Jess?' and er, it turned out that ... her laptop had broken and she'd asked to borrow his and he'd left, it was all in his history (I: right) and it was there and she'd seen it and erm just couldn't believe it and she said at first she pretended it hadn't it wasn't there it wasn't dad but then she started checking his phone [Julie clears her throat] and he'd been erm, there were pictures on his phone and he'd been sex texting and [Julie sighs] she said you know 'you've been meeting women dad' well he just said 'no I haven't, you're quite mistaken Jess that's wrong I haven't' and erm, Jess said, well...and I feel bad because I so wanted our relationship to work that I chose to believe him [Julie clears her throat] and Jess just said 'I'm sorry mum but from what I've seen he has met women' |
| | Julie | 487 | I just felt, it was terrible, I just found all these erm, pictures of women, erm, and men, and various sex acts and DVDs, erm, and then there were loads of e-mails and when I read the e-mails I knew he had been meeting women erm, yeah, and the way he described himself, and the, and what he wanted to do to these women and er, erm, and of course, having kept diaries, I could go and check and all the times when he'd erm, you know he had gone out of county to visit these women, various women, erm, and most of the time he'd paid them, erm, got hold of them online, and erm...erm...yeah there were times when he said he was going off to a cricket match or he was going to rugby or, and a lot of it was done in work's time when he was supposedly going on a training |

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| | *Julie* | *508* | I just felt awful, I just felt sick and then mixes of things really, then I felt so angry at how could he do this to us?! And then just this feeling of despair and thinking well that's it, I I can't forgive this, you know, I knew really that was the end, erm because of the betrayal and erm the lies and the and the impact on me |
| | Julie | 516 | I just had to get out of the house, er, uh, I just felt awful, I just felt sick and then mixes of things really, then I felt so angry at how could he do this to us? and then just this feeling of despair and thinking well that's it, I I can't forgive this, you know, I knew really that was the end, (I: yeah) erm because of the betrayal and erm the lies and the and the impact on me |
| | Julie | 671 | because of the women the other women he'd been with and you know some of his e-mails were very explicit about what he wanted to do to them (I: mhmm) and er...yeah I just felt repulsed and I thought you know, you just feel what you have with your partner is very special don't you and I felt that had just gone |
| | Julie | 1236 | once you're married you're loyal and you you're with your partner and you don't you know, and yeah as I said before it was just completely active betrayal and disrespect to me and...well it's quite special between you isn't it and then to break that and go off |
| | Julie | 1225 | That was it, the point of no return and I had actually said that to him, right at the beginning I said 'there's nothing worse Jeff, you haven't being viewing children, you haven't met women for sex' |
| | Sophia | 283 | he would not be only watching porn, he would be as well be just you know on the webcam with someone |
| | Sophia | 339 | when I saw that he was actually talking you know with someone, almost every day erm I felt betrayed, like it felt worse but I already felt betrayed from the beginning from before because I felt that the fact that he was going to watch porn instead of me, instead of coming to bed with me, instead you know, having that |

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| | | | moment with me, that for me already felt like a betrayal |
| | Sophia | 345 | that already felt like...erm...like kind of cheating in a way for me, because it's erm, it's like, I felt like he betrayed my my trust of him, because I was trust him, trusted him and he would just go there and be online watching porn |
| | Sophia | 357 | when I discovered that he was actually talking to someone as well, like probably it started online and then you know video chatting so I felt even worse because that for me is a real, a real cheating, because you are opening yourself for someone, even if there is no physical contact but I am just next door sleeping and you are here putting your willy out for someone you know to see it and it's just something that for me is very intimate and should be as a couple it should be you know, and not just for sharing |
| | Melissa | 103 | *her* seeing *her* and reading the messages between *them two* just, for me, at that moment, topped it off. |
| | Melissa | 164 | before the physical affair thing, 'I can do this, you know, I can forgive you for this, we can work through it, erm I've learned already a lot and erm, I know about the ego and things like that so let's, we can do this' |
| | Melissa | 588 | The physical affair, because the videos and stuff wasn't enough anymore, and because he was obsessing about more hard core things, and wanting to act out erm, that just took, for me, that made a difference |
| | Melissa | 92 | So I got into *that* e-mail account and I started seeing these messages between him and other women, and, Craig's list ads, and things that he had responded to, or ads that he had placed, looking for not only women but transgendered people seemed to be a big thing |
| | Melissa | 97 | that's when I first discovered that he was really doing a lot of stuff, and the erm, he was having an emotional affair. |

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| | Melissa | 107 | I discovered even more, and there was even more erm, dating websites and...fetish websites and, just, just all kinds of stuff, it was just, it was heartbreaking |
| | Melissa | 123 | then the next month I found that he'd had a physical affair that had lasted for 6 months |
| | Jade | 479 | So he told me all of that in one conversation erm, so I think I more than anything I was a bit numb and I heard...I heard rape porn probably the loudest and then I heard about him seeking out sex workers and so I guess the addiction to porn kind of got washed a little bit with those things |
| "If he's just been honest about it...": The significance of his lies and deceit | Hannah | 97 | he'd got that 'incognito' thing set up so he was hiding it from me and I didn't even know what that was |
| | Hannah | 111 | I kept asking him, he kept saying no |
| | Hannah | 142 | I'm like "please don't lie to me, just tell me the truth if you have, it doesn't matter, have you?" "No". So I asked him 20 times "No". So then I'm like, "OK, I'm gonna ask you, and I'm gonna ask you to swear on your mum's life, just tell me the truth" and he said "I swear, I haven't". And I fucking lost it. And that was the first time, proper, I was just done with this. "You're fucking lying, I've seen the tissues in the bin" blah blah blah "fuck you". And I stormed off back inside" |
| | Hannah | 180 | it was more the lying, you know, if I, if I ask somebody a question and they lie to me I'm just, I, I can't cope with that |
| | Hannah | 424 | if it's not an issue why are you hiding it from me? You know, leave it on the computer don't hide it |
| | Hannah | 421 | I've got friends whose boyfriends or husbands or whatever look at a lot of porn but it's all accepted and, but they don't hide it |
| | Hannah | 526 | just made me feel so sad because from day one, if he'd said yeah I do, would it have been |

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| | | | different |
| | Sophia | 82 | he would always deny it, he would never actually admit it |
| | Sophia | 89 | he said it was none none none of my business |
| | Sophia | 200 | he would just first never, always deny it, always that he was doing something else, that he was always working and I said "it's just not possible" |
| | Sophia | 210 | he would always, erm, delete the whole history from the computer |
| | Sophia | 256 | He denied it forever, forever he never never ever ever, not even for once, admitted it |
| | Sophia | 270 | Would just say "don't know what you're talking about, like you don't have proof, I don't do this, I don't do that" |
| | Sophia | 559 | he wouldn't even admit it, he would even not have the guts to have conversation with me and explain where you know, or give me some kind of reason or just, you know, an apology just something |
| | Sophia | 620 | he was having a conversation with me, he was explaining, you know, he was giving me a reason, [...] so that in a way, kind of like gave me some, kind of like confidence back in him, you know, saying ok, he's being open |
| | Carrie | 400 | when he had that last relapse he kept it secret from me for about 6 weeks which I didn't know he was capable of that...So that he was able to keep this secret for so long this fall scares me and I have, I have had a harder time dealing with this the past 10 months than I did all the 9 years before that |
| | Carrie | 499 | I've never asked him to not be a sex addict or a porn addict, I've never asked him to be perfect, I've never expected that he won't ever struggle (I: mhmm), what I want and need is for him to be honest about it, and I don't think that's too much to ask |
| | Carrie | 548 | I'm still hurt, I'm still sorting through the trauma that I experienced by the lying and the hiding |

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| | | | and the bingeing and all that |
| | Carrie | 782 | the kind of porn that he accessed during this relapse he hadn't looked at in 6+ years (I: right), so it was, it was far more severe like you know, 10 times more severe (I: mmmm) than anything he'd looked at in 6 years. That was shocking (I: mhmm), it was shocking. But it wouldn't have thrown me to the degree as the fact that he lied about it for so long (I: mmmm, yeah) |
| | Carrie | 301 | I wanted to tell him "look you're a good guy because you're willing to tell me" rather than you know, "you're a creep because you, you know, wanna look at porn" |
| | Carrie | 758 | Honesty. Authenticity, maybe that's the best way to say it (I: mhmm). Skip the smoke and mirrors, the semantics, the telling me just the pretty bits, just be real |

Master Theme 2 – The impact of the female partner's meaning-making

| Sub-theme | Participant | Line number | Quote |
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| "It's, you know, it's dirty, it's dirty": The female partner's perception of pornography use | Hannah | 250 | I still think it's *fucking disgusting,* it's absolutely disgusting |
| | Julie | 578 | obviously once we split up the tale was he'd had an affair |
| | Julie | 584 | I just had to stick to my story that yes he had met somebody else |
| | Julie | 1058 | it's so ashamed, I mean you don't anyone to know |
| | Julie | 1004 | It would have been easier if he'd died |
| | Melissa | 502 | ...it's that shame and that embarrassment, you know, not only for the relationship that people have belief that we had and that I believe that we had, but because of the subject, because of the porn. It's, you know, it's dirty, it's dirty. And **the stuff** that he saw, the stuff that he, **the stuff** [emboldened to reflect Melissa's emphasis] that he wanted to do, was....not stuff that I want other |

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| | | | people to know" |
| | Julie | 1184 | I'm quite...you know, disgusted with [porn] really I can't, yeah... |
| | Jade | 689 | Of all things to get addicted to, I mean, I I guess I am a bit prudish anyway and I always have been but of all things, I think I would have preferred it if he was addicted drugs or alcohol because you know, sex?! Really?! Pornography?! I just think it's disgusting, it makes you think of you know, lonely old men that do flashing |
| | Carrie | 454 | I'm not the girl who has major moral judgements about it. [5 second pause] I was never the girl who...was disgusted, or thought it was evil [...] The part about it that bothers me the most is not what he looks at, so much as the effect that it has on him and me |
| "I just thought I wasn't good enough so he'd gone elsewhere": A tendency to internalize her male partner's behaviour | Julie | 519 | just really knocked me, I just felt worthless, I felt, my esteem went, my confidence went |
| | Julie | 826 | you feel inadequate, as if, well perhaps I wasn't good enough sexually and that's why he had to look elsewhere |
| | Julie | 1008 | I feel I've got to prove that I'm alright |
| | Hannah | 358 | It knocked my confidence so bad. So so bad. I felt that...I wasn't attractive, I felt like...I always, I would always link it to that, to the photos on his phone that Lisa. I always thought there must have been something so magical about her and I bet he didn't fucking look at porn when he was with her, and, just, it just made me feel like I wasn't good enough |
| | Hannah | 450 | "I guess for me, if he wants to have sex that's because he loves me, and that is very weak pathetic thing to say, but that's that's me and if you don't want to then you probably don't love me" |
| | Hannah | 329 | he'd had a wank then as well and it was just to me, it hurt because it really felt like that was far more important than me. That maybe I was a shit shag, or I wasn't thin enough or I wasn't |

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| | | | more important than that I suppose, yeah, it was weird. |
| | Hannah | 322 | it made me feel that that, that that was more important than me, you know, he he wasn't phoning *me* |
| | Hannah | 358 | It knocked my confidence so bad. So so bad. I felt that...I wasn't attractive |
| | Hannah | 531 | at the time, my confidence was pretty low anyway and it was just a massive blow |
| | Hannah | 536 | I don't have a very high opinion of myself anyway, I'm not very pro me, and if anything it made it worse, it made me feel...shit. Just, yeah, it just made me feel very very sad, it made me feel very weak as well, that I wasn't strong enough to walk away |
| | Hannah | 538 | it made me feel very weak as well, that I wasn't strong enough to walk away |
| | Sophia | 54 | I felt you know upset, I felt, erm...and I felt like he didn't like anymore, I I felt you know insecure |
| | Sophia | 74 | if he really need to do this it's because you don't want to have sex with me so that made me feel really upset with myself, more so than with him |
| | Sophia | 76 | I felt that it was my fault, I felt that I wasn't doing something right I felt like maybe I was overweight, maybe I was erm I was not erm, you know, looking nice or maybe I was not erm seducing him, or I was not giving him something and that is, that was why he was looking for something, on you know, the porn |
| | Sophia | 133 | that was really, really upsetting for me because I was saying it's not that he doesn't have the desire he just don't want to do it with me |
| | Sophia | 141 | just felt completely, erm, what do you call it, with like with really low self-esteem because I said well, if my boyfriend you know doesn't have any desire for me then...but he is interested in another woman , or having or watching so basically he's saying that he doesn't desire me |

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| | Sophia | 220 | he was just shutting me out, and I just felt, I, it's when I start to feel that it is with me, that was not that he didn't want to, was that he didn't want to with me |
| | Sophia | 223 | it brought me, erm to question myself if I was like, is there something that I can do, is there something that I should have |
| | Melissa | 268 | I found you know, perfect bodies you know, fitness models, that's not me. And...if that's what he wanted, if that's what he found attractive and that doesn't look like me, then where does that leave me? |
| | Melissa | 277 | I felt he, he turned to porn cause I wasn't good enough...I wasn't attractive, I wasn't desirable. I felt like he must think I'm ugly and he must not love me. So...ultimately I felt ugly, unlovable, unwanted, replaceable, discardable and and overall just less-than |
| | Melissa | 213 | it made me doubt myself, because how could I be so close to someone, know someone so well, and they were doing all of this behind my back, without me knowing. So what's wrong with me? |
| | Melissa | 292 | I didn't know who I was, I I felt trapped, and I felt less than, and...the view of myself was just *so* dark and *so* horrible, so self-loathing |
| | Carrie | 320 | I felt that it was doing something for him that I wanted to do and obviously wasn't doing as well (I: mhmm) though it was a "I'm not as good as, I'm not as sexy as, he would rather have that" type of feelings |
| | Carrie | 337 | I have *fully* embraced the idea that him looking at porn has nothing to do with me (I: mmmk). And I'll tell you how I learned that, I started going to support groups and meeting women who are super models, movie stars (I: mhmm), president CEOs, just beautiful, brilliant, perfect women. And their guys look at porn too (I: mmmk). You know it was when the Sandra Bullocks of the world and the you know, all those people started coming out and I started realising, "Ok this really is not about me" (I: mmmm), because if it was about I look like or |

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| | | | how, you know, if I was, a lot of the questions most partners go through are you know, "if I were just a better this, a better that, whatever." So today, how it's changed is, I don't go there anymore, I, I just have really fully rejected that idea (I: mhmm). Do I still feel tweaks and twinges of it sometimes? Sure (I: mmmk). Yeah, I mean there's times where I know that he's been on a porn binge that I just really don't want him to look at my body |
| | Carrie | 471 | when he chooses to look at that instead of me, it affects how I feel about my own femininity, sexuality, beauty, whatever and I, I *want* to celebrate those things, I *want* to feel good about myself, and apart from him I do, but when he comes back in with that activity happening in his life, in his world, it it shadows me in a sense and I don't feel as erm [4 second pause] I just don't feel as empowered I guess for lack of a better word or as aware, as excited, whatever about myself |
| | Jade | 547 | No, [I never had any thoughts about it meaning something about me] because he'd started way before we met |
| | Jade | 505 | I talk to a lot of women who have been through the same and a lot of women are very upset by the fact that their husbands have looked at other women naked, and you know, online and things like that, erm, and it's not something that bothers me, erm, and it's not something that would make me feel insecure about my body |
| | Sophia | 242 | because I'm more like quite confident person I did question myself but after a few months I realized that was nothing wrong with me |
| | Sophia | 446 | it came from me reflecting upon the relationship, upon his er his behaviour and just thinking, you know what there's nothing wrong with me and the problem here is him and erm, in a way I don't believe that I've done anything wrong, I don't believe I've done anything that justifies his behaviour towards me |

Master Theme 3 – A lonely experience

| Sub-theme | Participant | Line number | Quote |
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| "He just didn't grasp the significance of what he'd done": The significance of her male partner's response | Julie | 530 | he said to me can we not just forget this silly business and I said 'Jeff, have you any idea what you've done' |
| | Julie | 649 | he just didn't grasp the significance of what he'd done |
| | Julie | 675 | he just couldn't really seem to or maybe didn't want to understand how he'd betrayed me, as if he he just thought that was alright and it was that was another side to his life |
| | Julie | 867 | the other women...the ones who were staying with their partners they had, the men had identified they had a problem and they were really trying to do something about it...Jeff never did that |
| | Julie | 874 | it was just referred to as 'silly business |
| | Julie | 878 | he really didn't think it was a problem, he didn't think it was serious |
| | Hannah | 494 | I think if he'd not been sorry about it and, told me you know "fuck off that's my computer, you should've never looked, I can do whatever I want" then, then I probably would have left |
| | Sophia | 256 | He denied it forever, forever he never never ever ever, not even for once, admitted it |
| | Sophia | 402 | I had had enough and I just didn't know what to do, I didn't know what else to do because I'd said, I like him but I don't believe I love him anymore and, but if he was willing to try and change I would probably give him a chance, but there was nothing to indicate it for me |
| | Carrie | 610 | I've had to learn to speak up when I don't feel comfortable (I: mhmm). You know a lot of partners of sex addicts or porn addicts feel triggered, that's the word we use, by something that happens, and if he says "oh that's not a problem, that's not bothering me, or I didn't see that or I didn't watch that," we feel like "well ok |

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| | | | if he says it's not a problem, then I shouldn't be reacting to it." But kind of shifting that focus to say "look, if it bothers me, that's legit enough" (I: mmmm). So that's a lot of what I've learned in therapy (I: mhmm), how to speak up for my voice, how to you know, honour my own feelings about something. |
| "What's the problem? He's a bloke. Get over it!": The invalidating response from society | Hannah | 130 | "oh what's the problem, he's a bloke, blokes wank, what's the problem, what's the problem, who cares" so it was hard for me because on one hand I was like, maybe he's got the right to do whatever he wants, of course he does but then the other hand, if he's wanking, he doesn't want to have sex does he, he's cum, he's done, so why would he, why would he want to have sex with me |
| | Hannah | 490 | a lot of people said "what's the problem? He's a bloke. Get over it". So I thought, you know, I loved him, and he was a good person, and if I walked away would I kick myself for the rest of my life because, because he looked at porn and maybe all guys do |
| | Hannah | 248 | a lot of people said "I don't know why it's a problem", so it made me feel like it was me being stupid about it when even now I still think it's *fucking disgusting,* it's absolutely disgusting. |
| | Sophia | 129 | she just said I was very silly, that you know it was nothing, that I shouldn't pay any attention, and erm I didn't continue the conversation and of course I didn't tell her that we haven't had actually sex for about like two or three months |
| | Sophia | 135 | there was no-one really that could really talk about it because anyone that I mentioned something, you know, trying to get some sort of comfort or, er they just say that I'm silly, that, you know, that there is no problem that you know I shouldn't be upset, that's nothing wrong |
| | Sophia | 118 | she said "but so what?" I was like well "but you know I got a bit upset" and she just said that was silly, and at that point I was thinking, you know, maybe it's my fault, maybe you know it's just me, maybe she's right, maybe I am silly, maybe it's something that, you know, it shouldn't make |

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| | | | me upset because you know it's the norm like, as she said "you know all the mens they all do it so why you making a fuss about it" |
| | Sophia | 129 | she just said I was very silly, that you know it was nothing, that I shouldn't pay any attention, and erm I didn't continue the conversation and of course I didn't tell her that we haven't had actually sex for about like two or three months |
| | Sophia | 640 | "but I don't see it why for you is a problem" |
| | Sophia | 662 | "hypothetically speaking if you walk in or you take the iPad or your computer and your boyfriend was watching porn, what do you do?" and she was like "nothing...good for him," and I was like "really?!"[...] I was in shock |
| | Jade | 790 | I think people's lack of understanding er I think there are definitely some friends that if I'd said porn was an issue they would have laughed in my face [...] I don't think that they would see sex or having too much sex or watching sex as ever detrimental to you, or your health or your marriage |
| | Carrie | 672 | one day I read a book, a very mainstream Christian book, for women who erm had sex addict husbands, and the book said, and this is not verbatim but it's very close erm "God can't have 2 sick suffering children, he needs you to get well so that you can get well so that you can help your husband." And I just about died, Charley, I literally threw that book across the room it made me *so* angry, that this message to women was "you can't be hurt, you've gotta get over that so that you can help him." Damn it made me *mad*, I cried for 2 days straight and I didn't know why and one of my friends said "look, you're tapping into the collective pain of women who hear *this* message" |
| Loneliness of experience mediated by support | Hannah | 669 | in the counselling that we've had now...it was brought up and...kind of brushed to the side, you know, it wasn't, it wasn't talked about, it was "he did this, this is how I felt" and it, we didn't talk about it |

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| | Hannah | 695 | Just didn't think about [getting counselling for myself]. I was hurting and I didn't think seeing a counsellor was going to make me feel any better. It kind of was what it was and I was just gonna have to suck it up I suppose. But no, I never even considered it because I didn't think it was my problem, it was his, that he needed to stop |
| | Sophia | 445 | I'm not gonna say I had support from any of my friends because I didn't |
| | Sophia | 814 | I thought about [getting professional help] |
| | Sophia | 822 | a few times I considered but, to be very honest, if I was in my country, I would have had professional help because my country er, I have erm, kind of like a private coverage so you just call your doctor, you choose your doctor, you go there, you make an appointment and you go and see on the same day. In here it's a lot harder |
| | Sophia | 830 | is quite hard to get hold of[...] I wouldn't even know how to go about |
| | Melissa | 469 | there's not a lot of support for, for this |
| | Melissa | 609 | I haven't yet, but I do plan on it |
| | Carrie | 375 | We started therapy and recovery for this issue before we got married (I: ok). So we've been doing this recovery thing for 10 years |
| | Carrie | 566 | we went to see a couples therapist before we got married, erm, mainly due to this issue, it was just, we were fighting over it, it was it was a constant conflict, and she was the one first who basically said "this is not just a bad habit, it's not going to go away on its own" and she looked at me and she said "you can't fix it for him" erm she said "I think he's a sex addict, he needs to go to this 12 step group." So he went to SA, sexaholics anonymous |
| | Carrie | 577 | he came home from that meeting and said there was also a group for partners of sex addicts so that was the S-Anon, so if you're familiar with Al-Anon, it's the same dynamic (I: mhmm) so it's for partners or friends and family or any, basically anyone who's been affected by the |

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| | | | sexual behaviour of another person (I: right). So 10 years ago, and we've been going every week since, that's been our main stay |
| | Carrie | 584 | over the years we've both done extensive therapy (I: mhmm) as well, erm, there's a special therapeutic designation for us CSAT, which is certified sex addiction therapist (I: mhmm) erm, I've also worked with therapists who are well trained in trauma, and deal with partners' trauma responses to a lot of this, erm rupture to the secure relational attachments and those kinds of things. |
| | Carrie | 701 | This is now my social circle (I: right, ok), I mean I can count on one hand the number of friends I have that aren't also partners of sex addicts (I: OK) in one form or another (I: uh huh). |
| | Carrie | 869 | 10 years that I've been involved in this is long enough for me to get a sense of things have gotten better. Resources have gotten better (I: mhmm). 10 years ago no one was doing projects like this (I: mmmm), *nobody,* no one. If anything was being done it was about the porn addict (I: yeah), the sex addict, not about the partners (I: no), *nothing* for us, nothing. And so even though sometimes I look around and say there's still isn't much, there's *a lot* more than there was 10 years ago (I: yeah). |
| | Julie | 800 | "I can't speak too highly of the support I've had really my GP" |
| | Julie | 818 | "the change for me was going on that course" |
| | Julie | 857 | "the other thing that helped on the course was meeting the other women" |
| | Julie | 1084 | "it just helps so much doesn't it talking to someone who's been through it" |
| | Carrie | 738 | I'm convinced I would not have had the courage to follow through with the marriage if it had not been for the women that I've found in my support groups. There were women there who had been divorced (I: uh huh) because of this issue, there were women there who had erm stayed married because of this issue, and they all |

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| | | | supported me, I mean some of them wanted to scream "no don't do it" and I've had the chance to meet other women in my shoes and part of me wants to scream "no don't do it" [laughs] |
| | Sophia | 880 | apart from my Mum, no one really knows because it seems like something that you don't really discuss, that's why when I saw your, your project I was like, I really think that there should be more going on because I'm sure there is so many people that go through the same thing (I: mmmm) they just don't talk about it, they just don't, don't talk so... |
| | Melissa | 429 | hardly anybody knows about it |
| | Jade | 719 | for a real long time, erm, I didn't tell anyone. I felt very lonely |
| | Jade | 882 | a lot of us suffer in silence |

Master Theme 4 – The layers of loss

| Sub-theme | Participant | Line number | Quote |
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| "It was a fairytale, it was meant to be. And so now I know there are no fairytales": The loss of the fairy-tale relationship | Julie | 468 | people always said 'oh you two, you're so in love aren't you' |
| | Hannah | 610 | But it's so hard, so hard...Because I want fireworks and fairy tales, you know. I don't wanna just *be* with somebody, and that be enough |
| | Melissa | 5 | we grew up in the same neighbourhood, we rode the same school bus, I met him when I was 10 years old [...] when I was about 13 I realized I had developed a crush on him [...] by the time I was 16 I felt like I was in love him |
| | Melissa | 23 | We were the best of friends, we had a great relationship, we never fought [...] it was completely fate [...] he was truly my soul mate [...] We got along so well, we had so much in common. The relationship was great |
| | Melissa | 39 | We had no secrets |

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| | Melissa | 34 | for the first 5 years it was, it was really truly like a dream come true |
| | Melissa | 221 | that meant that our entire marriage had been a lie. What was truth? What was reality? |
| | Melissa | 249 | it feels like everything is stolen |
| | Melissa | 384 | it was a fairytale. It was meant to be, and I lived in denial. And so now I know there are no fairytales, you cannot live in denial |
| | Melissa | 394 | before there was no doubt in my mind, we were going to go the distance, there was nothing that was going to come between us, we were never going to get a divorce, none of this other stuff, and now, yeah, everything and anything is possible |
| | Melissa | 420 | People have always perceived our relationship as...erm, a goal kind of relationship to have [...] *everyone* saw us as...a strong, good, healthy couple. A relationship to emulate. |
| | Melissa | 433 | up until, yeah, very recently, everyone has thought that we were the ideal couple |
| | Jade | 490 | we were great, we were so happy and everyone said that we had a really good relationship and a lot of our friends would actually say you know, that's what they were looking for, er, a relationship like ours and then you know, so many years later we're sat on the sofa and he's telling me how he knows how to go and pay for sex and and how he likes watching women get raped |
| | Carrie | 149 | I'm telling ya, it was love at first sight [chuckles], it was just one of those instant romantic connections, so much so that the first night we met I got on my bus to go home and went in the wrong direction. |
| | Carrie | 688 | at a time where things were really good. I mean we were now towards the second of those 3 year stretches (I: yeah) without any issues and feeling very safe, very strong, very inspired, you know feeling like we were a success story of sorts (I: mhmm), so you can imagine I've had some |

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| | | | challenges to dealing with that as well |
| | Carrie | 774 | I think grief is probably the biggest thing (I: mmmm) followed by maybe disappointment (I: mhmm), little bit of disillusionment (I: mhmm), letting go of things like, I can sit here and say I wish this or it could have been that, and know that in saying those things there's, what's the good in it? |
| "This knight in shining armour, to me, now was just a f***ing liar": The loss of an idealized male partner | Julie | 281 | if you met him, and a lot of people still think this of him, that he's a big sort of gentile child, big cuddly Jeff but he definitely had this other side to him |
| | Julie | 418 | the other thing that's chilling about the whole thing was what a good liar he became...and I always thought of him, me being a bit more savvy and him being a bit erm, what's the word, a bit naïve in a way (I: mmmm) a bit sort of country bumpkin-ish [Julia laughs] and now realize that was totally wrong and as I say there, very much a Jekyll and Hyde personality, you know, to, because he was so clever, the way he erm, not a flicker, you know, and he lied to, he lied to so many people |
| | Julie | 879 | he naively thought he could continue with this double life |
| | Hannah | 484 | it was really fucking, really fucking hard, because I just didn't trust him, I didn't trust *anything* at all. And that was because of that |
| | Hannah | 518 | because he's such a kind, people-pleaser I suppose, it made me just see almost like a dark side to him that I didn't like, he's a liar, and he will lie through his teeth to me, and it just made me think god |
| | Hannah | 563 | when I found, you know, every day, every time, he'd done it, and then I could see how calculating |
| | Hannah | 534 | So did it change my opinion of him, yes. I didn't like him |
| | Hannah | 565 | he wasn't doing it to have a chat and be caring, he was doing it so he could have a wank before I got home, and *that* fucking hurt so bad |

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| | Hannah | 567 | This knight in shining armour, to me, now was just a fucking liar |
| | Sophia | 553 | I used to think that he was a man of integrity, of conviction, of erm respect, that's what he showed me, that's why I fell in love him with, but that just changed completely my perception, completely |
| | Sophia | 564 | started having a different vision or perception of him, as a man, as my partner |
| | Melissa | 96 | I was like, 'who is this person?! Who is this person?!' |
| | Melissa | 141 | he all of a sudden became a stranger, and enemy, a person that [sighs] I didn't recognize, the things that he was looking at, talking about, that wasn't the guy that I knew |
| | Melissa | 299 | I have a hard time with him now, sometimes I look at him and I'm, I'm like, 'I don't know what's real and what's not real, with you, because damn you were *good* at living a double life, very very good at hiding stuff' |
| | Melissa | 404 | I love him (I: mhmm) and I hate him. Er, I can remember the him that I knew and then I remember the him that I know now |
| | Jade | 798 | I didn't want people to see Jake like that really, erm, I didn't want them to view him how I viewed him cause I, I couldn't look at him for very long without like, some days it made me physically sick how grossed out by him I was erm, and I didn't want anyone else to see this guy that was so sweet in the beginning turn into such, you know, a weird pervert |
| | Jade | 340 | he just was horrendous about me the whole time, about you know, how erm just really archaic, just how I didn't live up to you know, the woman's role within a relationship [laughing] and and things like, just things that I would never have thought that he would have said |
| | Jade | 349 | I was sat in this room with this guy that I felt like I'd *never* met before and I was trying to say to the counsellor that, you know, 'coming to |

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| | | | couple's counselling is all well and good, when you come with your partner but I don't know who that is,' |
| | Jade | 356 | this wasn't him like, my Jake, although he's a big guy he's meek and mild and kind and friendly and would do anything for anyone and he was just *horrendous*. Erm, and he would say really horrible things about me constantly |
| | Jade | 484 | that's not something you expect to hear from your partner at all you know, especially mine |
| | Jade | 519 | And not just horrible you know, but intentionally horrible to me, like he would go out of his way to hurt me or to hurt my feelings and I don't know how that happened, I don't know where that came home, cause he would *never* have done that in the first few years of our relationship, my happiness was very important to him and vice versa |
| | Jade | 671 | as he started to get better I started to see the other Jake in there and I do love him, I still love that Jake but just really don't like the other one |
| | Jade | 517 | I wasn't hurt by the fact that he'd been watching porn the thing that upset me was that it had changed his personality and it had turned him into such a horrible person. |
| | Jade | 525 | so, that's what I was upset about, the fact that it had turned this lovely person into somebody that was just so horrible, that hurt me more than anything, and I still, I still don't feel uncomfortable about my body at all |
| | Carrie | 400 | when he had that last relapse he kept it secret from me for about 6 weeks which I didn't know he was capable of that...So that he was able to keep this secret for so long this fall scares me and I have, I have had a harder time dealing with this the past 10 months than I did all the 9 years before that. So we're at a place where I'm not leaving yet, I feel less secure in our marriage than I've ever felt |
| "The biggest casualty of all of | Sophia | 146 | the way it affected most was my confidence, and I am quite a confidence person, I never had any |

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| this would be losing myself": The loss of self | | | low esteem er issues or anything during my teenager years, I felt very good with myself, and I was always very, you know, happy and I never really cared too much about my weight, I was always you know felt confident in my skin, up until that point so I think that that was er kind of a really difficult time |
| | Sophia | 508 | I'm going to look for something it's because maybe you gave me reasons to do that in the first place because I was not like that but you made me |
| | Sophia | 514 | I was not like that at the beginning of our relationship |
| | Sophia | 568 | I felt really horrible because I'm not that kind of person, I'm not, you know, the kind of person that spies on someone (I: yeah) but then again I felt that I wanted to, I wanted to know what was going on |
| | Melissa | 209 | Oh...[sighs] ...it has destroyed the self that I was. It has destroyed that person. I'm going to have to, and I've been trying to rebuild myself basically from ground up |
| | Carrie | 643 | my sexuality used to be all about feeding his addiction, we've stopped doing that, now what's my sexuality about? |
| | Carrie | 794 | losing this relationship would not be the ultimate casualty, of this porn addiction. Losing me, losing myself, if I gave up on me for the sake of just keeping peace in the relationship, or letting him off the hook or whatever, to me *that's* that would be the ultimate casualty of all this (I: mhmm). |
| | Carrie | 849 | if he gave up, trying (I: yeah), or if I just realized in my gut that I was losing too much of myself for the sake of trying to be healthy with him (I: uh huh). Those are the things that would make me say "I don't know if I can do this anymore" |