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The Varieties of Spiritual States Triggered by Sex: A Systematic Review of the Empirical Literature

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This systematic review integrates the empirical evidence of spiritual experiences triggered by sexual activity, including studies by 10 authors. Despite venerable sexual meditative traditions of embodied spiritual practices, such as Hindu Tantra, Vajrayana Buddhism, and Taoism, empirical studies of sexual spiritual experiences are in their infancy. This review presents the range of sexual altered states experiences identified to date and how they qualify as spiritual experiences phenomenologically and in terms of their lifechanging effects. Seventeen distinct sexual-spiritual states have been identified across authors, with 4 others identified at significant levels in qualitative studies by individual authors. As an emergent area of scholarly interest, research on this topic remains scattered across disciplines and is characterized by small studies, many advanced by doctoral students conducting dissertation research. This article integrates the empirical research and situates it in a larger, diverse theoretical, historical, and anecdotal literature, to critically assess consensus on the topic. Deliberate practices, adventitious conditions, human physiology, and other dynamics that conduce to sexual spiritual experiences are discussed.

Keywords: *altered states, sex, spiritual experience, sexual spiritual experience, orgasm, transformation, embodied spirituality*

Sexual behavior inherently involves the altered state of orgasm, whose phenomenology as a discrete state of consciousness has not been satisfactorily described in the scholarly literature (e.g., Klimaj & Safron, 2016; Meston et al., 2004), which tends to view it from physiological (e.g., Huynh et al., 2013; Komisaruk et al., 2006; Levin, 2002), evolutionary (e.g., King et al., 2011; Lloyd, 2005; Puts et al., 2012), and psychological (e.g., Gilliland, 2009; Mah & Binik, 2002) perspectives. Orgasm is distinct from the transcendent experiences people consider sexual-spiritual states and is not confused with them (Ogden, 1999, 2006, 2007; Sokol, 1986, 1989; Wade, 2004), nor is orgasm necessary to produce a spiritual experience during sex, though some authors (e.g., Sayin, 2011, 2012; Taylor, 2000) have examined spiritual experiences in the context of prolonged orgasm. A history of sexual abuse is known to produce dissociative states during sex even in a subsequent loving relationship (e.g.,

Bækkelund, et al., 2018; Kelley & Gidycz, 2019, 2017), but people with histories of sexual trauma have clearly distinguished sexual spiritual states from dissociation (Elfers, 2009; Little, 2009; Wade, 2004).

Spiritual experiences, on the other hand, are distinguished by altered-state phenomena and their transformative sequelae, though no consensus definition exists. According to Laubach (2004), spiritual experiences are “intrusions in the stream of consciousness ... perceived ... as not originating within the ‘self’” but “having the same facticity as empirical experience” (p. 239). Prest and Keller (1993) defined them as merging with something outside the self, transcending individual existence, and sensing a presence larger than the self that somehow also encompasses the self (cf. Mencken et al., 2009; Sushan, 2014). May (1974) said a spiritual experience involves a direct feeling “of the ground of being, or of the process of flow of the

universe...in which one feels at one with creation, deeply meaningful, and in pervasive union with all things" (p. 85). Spiritual experiences are "felt as big, boundless, and intense...somehow timeless, open, selfless, helpless, and as basically desirable" (Selvey, 1977, p. 77). Hinterkof (1994) and Myers and Willard (2003) emphasized their transformational effects that cause people to "move beyond former frames of reference and risk change" (Myers & Willard, 2014, p. 149).

Sexually-sparked spiritual states appear to be an innate human capacity, suggested by historical and current documentation. Even without intentionally looking for them, sex researchers (e.g., Maurer, 1994; Ogden, 2006; Scantling & Browder, 1993) have uncovered spiritual experiences, and spiritual researchers (Bragdon, 1988, 1990; Greeley, 1974; Grof, 1975, 1985, 1988, 1998; Kreutzer, 1978, Laskey, 1961; Maslow, 1987) have uncovered sex as a trigger. Embodied spiritual paths such as neo-Tantra deliberately cultivate such experiences (e.g., Bonheim, 1997; Feuerstein, 1989, 1992, 1998). The following section provides a very brief sketch of historical relationships between sex and spirituality.

A Brief History of the Intersection of Sex and Spirituality

The body with its capacity for sensuality has had a tortuous relationship with spirituality. Very little is known about spirituality in ancient hunter-forager societies of the earliest days of humankind, when survival needs were a daily uncertainty and little more than half the population reached puberty (Gurven & Kaplan, 2007), and much of what is surmised is highly speculative. Prehistoric finds are difficult to interpret but may reflect a kind of embodied spirituality. For example, Gimbutas (1982, 1989, 1991) alleged that the so-called Venus figurines of females with grossly exaggerated breasts, buttocks, and bellies found from France to Siberia represent "the Goddess" of a Paleolithic hunter-gatherer fertility cult, but such claims are disputed (e.g., Eller, 2000; Goodison & Morris, 1998; Hutton, 1991; Tannahill, 1980). Almost nothing is known about indigenous peoples' connections of sexuality and spirituality, but their separation into distinct categories is likely a colonial importation (e.g., Hoppál, 1987; Kehoe, 2000; Vitebsky, 2001). Most

surviving indigenous cultures have been so disrupted that direct transmission of their spiritual lineages have probably been lost (e.g., Sigal, 2000, 2011), and the degree to which reconstituted paths, such as neo-shamanism, reflect actual indigenous practices is suspect (e.g., Wallis, 2003; Whisker, 2013).

With agriculture and civilization, religious institutions began to regulate and restrict spiritual access to a priestly class, as well as promulgate norms controlling sexuality. Even today many religions consider sex a distraction from the spiritual path (e.g., Armstrong 1993; Brown, 1988; Faure, 1998; Heyward, 2010; Nelson, 2010; Pagels 1988; Schacter-Shalomi 1991; Tannahill 1980; Waite 1960; Weisner-Hanks, 2000); for some it is a defilement permanently barring humanity from the divine. The religious regulation of sexuality may come from the fact that sex enables anyone—without "benefit of clergy"—to access directly spiritual ecstasy, revelation, and transformation without recourse to a priestly class. Over time, obfuscation and obstruction of sex as a gateway to spiritual experience has been widespread.

The first known text, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, contains a story of spiritually transformative sex involving Enkidu, a bestial, hairy creature who grazes on all fours and drinks from a watering hole with other animals. By divine command, Shamhat, a priestess of sacred sex, makes love to Enkidu for a week. When they are sated, Enkidu has transformed into a resplendent, partly divine human form: animals now avoid him, he walks upright, his "understanding had broadened" and he became "beautiful...like a god" (Tablet 1; Kovacs translation, 1989, p. 9). Ritual sex was part of some religions in the ancient Middle East (e.g., Glazebrook, 2008; Lapinkivi, 2008; Lucian, *De Syria Dea*, 28–29; Roth, 2006; Smith, 2008; Teppo, 2008; Zimmerman, 2008), Greece, and Rome (e.g., Avagianou, 2008; Beard, 1996; Keesling, 2006; Latham, 2012; Roller, 1998, 1999). But exactly what sacred sex was in fertility cults and sexual mystery schools like those of Isis, Pan, Ishtar, Cybele, and Dionysus has been lost.

Sex for spiritual purposes still occurs in some Asian religions, notably Hindu Tantra, Vajrayana Buddhism, and Taoism. Although Hinduism

prominently features the sexuality of certain deities, fertility rites, and sex technique manuals like the *Kama Sutra*, carnal desire is to be avoided because it ties humanity to the world of illusion (e.g., Courtright, 2006; Kakar, 1994). Spiritual realization is impossible without the elimination of desire, according to Nyaya, Yoga, and Vedanta Hinduism and most classic Sanskrit texts. Tantra, a relatively late, “reverse spirituality” yogic practice, was a rebellion against religious conventions involving engaging in normally forbidden practices, especially sex, to show that Spirit exists even in the unclean (e.g., Courtright, 2006; Parrinder, 1996; Tannahill, 1980; White, 2003). In Hindu Tantra, partnered sex was abandoned as soon as the (male) aspirant learned to manage the subtle masculine and feminine energies of his own body absent coitus to attain realization. Similarly, in Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhism and classic Buddhist texts, such as the *Visuddhimagga*, the successful seeker is celibate, having quashed sexual desire (Cole, 2006; Faure, 1998; Tannahill, 1980; Van Gulik, 1974). Even Vajrayana Buddhism, a Tantric form derived from indigenous Tibetan and Indian roots, requires years of contemplation before seekers can participate in ritualized sexual practices that have more to do with meditation than with lovemaking (Faure, 1998; Gayley, 2018; Van Gulik, 1974). Taoist sex, on the other hand, based on the male and female principles of yang and yin, advocates protracted heterosexual lovemaking to maximize the number and duration of the woman’s orgasm while the man withholds ejaculation based on the belief that the man’s health and “immortality” are fed by the woman’s orgasmic energy and his retention of semen, thought to be irreplaceable life essence (e.g., Kohn, 1992; Parrinder, 1996; Saso, 1997). Taoist sexual practices can, however, involve austerities, including celibacy (Eskildsen, 1998; Komjathy, 2007). It is unclear whether Taoist methods produce spiritual states per se owing to the obscure euphemisms of classic sex manuals (e.g., *Fang-nei-chi*, *I-shin-po*) unless immortality is a cognate for realization.

Of the Abrahamic religions, Judaism retained the closest association of sex with spirituality. To this day Jews, especially religious leaders, are supposed to marry and procreate (e.g., Berger, 2006). Marital

sex is a religious duty, though sects differ regarding how often to engage in sex and how much to enjoy it (Pagels, 1979; Tannahill, 1980). Kabbalism, a mystical form that emerged in the Middle Ages, viewed coitus as a spiritual act enabling aspirants to participate in the masculine and feminine aspects of God sustaining the cosmos (Ariel, 1988; Berger, 2006; Hoffman, 1992; Waite, 1960).

Jesus is portrayed in Christian scriptures as clashing with the mainstream Judaism of his time by condoning practices that would limit procreation; he forbade divorcing a wife for infertility (Matthew 19:4–6) and connected celibacy with eternal life (Luke 20:34–36). The apostle Paul recommended celibacy as the path to salvation, even in marriage (1 Corinthians 7:1–35). The convention that Jesus and Paul were unmarried Jewish men has called their sexuality into question, including the possibility that they were eunuchs, speculation supported by Matthew 19:12, which suggests the spiritual superiority of males born without testicles or who castrated themselves “for the kingdom of heaven’s sake” (e.g., Caner, 1997; Hester, 2005). For that reason, castration—not just celibacy—went in and out of favor during the early centuries of the church (Caner, 1997; Hester, 2005; Ringrose, 1996; Stevenson, 2002) and was practiced by some sects into the 20th century (Engelstein, 1999; Tulpe & Torchinov, 2000), including excision of women’s and children’s genitalia to ensure salvation through sexual purity. Since the first century, orthodox Christianity has viewed sex as an integral part of the “original sin” separating humanity from God—if not the sin itself (e.g., Johnson & Jordan, 2006; Ware, 1997; Weisner-Hanks, 2000).

In contrast, sexuality is consecrated in the Qur’an (e.g., 2:25, 3:15, 4:57), and Mohammed’s sexual prowess validated his holiness (Parrinder, 1996). Islam technically considers sexuality a natural, healthy drive in men and women, with the Qur’an condemning celibacy for spiritual purposes (57:27). However, just as Hinduism evolved toward sexual conservatism (Pattaniak, 2007; Söhnen-Thieme, 1996), Moslem scholars increasingly downplayed Mohammed’s sexuality (Parrinder, 1996): mainstream Islam became sexually conservative, as reflected in the laws governing contemporary

Moslem cultures. Mystical forms of Islam, however, include a sacred feminine principle and sacralization of intercourse (Al-Hibri & Habti, 2006). For example, Baul contemplatives liken the spiritual relationship between Allah and Mohammed, between Allah and the seeker, and between the spiritual teacher and seeker to the love between a man and a woman “whose body is the temple of Allah and within whom is the unwritten Qur’an” (McDaniel, 1989, p. 164). Nevertheless, except for obscure Kabbalistic texts, none of the Abrahamic traditions frankly associates spiritual realization with lovemaking.

Presently, mainly in Anglophone and European cultures, the felt need for a more sexually inclusive, somatic spirituality has been expressed in the New Age (e.g., Chrissedes, 2007; Hanegraaff, 1998; Heelas, 1996) and its attendant new religious movements (NRMs; e.g., Dawson, 1998; Kosmin, & Keysar, 2008; Lewis, 2007), including feminist revivals of alleged ancient “goddess religions” and Wicca (e.g., Eller, 2006; Meyers, 2014; Spencer-Wood, 2007) and reconstituted paths, such as neo-shamanism, ritual magic, and neo-Tantra (e.g., Komjathy, 2007; Ley, 2013; Urban, 2000, 2003; Wagar, 2009; White, 2003). With some cultures’ increasing acceptance of same-sex liaisons and variety in gender expression, the heteronormative male-female, masculine-feminine dualities central to classic religious traditions are giving way to greater recognition of sexually ambiguous and/or hermaphroditic, third-gender constructs always recognized as sacred incarnations in some traditional cultures (e.g., Gudorf, 2010; Henriques, 1962; Hutchins, 2002), such as the *hijras* and *jogappas* of India (e.g., Loh, 2014; Nanda, 1999), the *berdaches* or Two-Spirit people of Native America (e.g., Jacobs, Thomas, & Lang, 1997; Zuber-Chall, 2012), and the *nat kadaws*, *meinmasha*, *acaault* or *achauk* of Myanmar (Coleman, Colgan, & Gooren, 1992; Ho, 2009). Whether any of the sexual practices of newer paths, such as the Wiccan *heiros gamos* (Great Rite; Wagar, 2009), produce transformational spiritual experiences is unknown.

The following sections present the empirical research on altered states triggered by sex that may represent the natural range of human potential for such experiences and why people consider them spiritual.

Contemporary Research on Sexual Spiritual Experiences

Systematic exploration of sexually produced altered states began a few decades ago with a dissertation by Sokol (1986) interviewing 4 male and 4 female Tantric practitioners about transcendental states they had experienced during sex. The next study, which gained some publicity, was an extension of Scantling’s 1990 dissertation showing a positive relationship between women’s sexual enjoyment and proclivity for sexual fantasy and absorption, in which she interviewed 68 women who scored high on absorption and uncovered altered-state phenomena she called “supersex”: vivid imagery related to energetic sensations, timelessness, loss of self-awareness, a sense of oneness and safety, and preternatural knowing (Scantling & Browder, 1993, pp. 45–54).

A burst of studies followed. Sex therapist Gina Ogden (1999, 2006, 2007) administered a self-devised survey on sexuality and spirituality to one of the largest sex-study samples ($N = 3810$). Some items asked whether participants associated certain descriptors with sexual or spiritual satisfaction, such as “Oneness with nature” and “Oneness with a power greater than self” (Ogden, n.d.), and many participants contributed narratives of their experiences. Ogden, who disclaimed being a scholar, never formally analyzed her data but did publish some descriptive statistics, very general qualitative themes, and case histories (1999, 2001, 2006, 2007), which mention sexual-spiritual experiences. About the same time, Wade (1998, 2000a,b, 2001a,b, 2003a,b, 2004) conducted the first phenomenological study specifically on “transcendent, mystical, nonordinary or altered states” during partnered sex when not using psychotropic drugs or sexual-meditative techniques (2001b, p. 103), culminating in a saturation sample of 91 men and women. MacKnee published his dissertation study (2002), an eponymous phenomenological investigation of the “profound sexual and spiritual encounters” of ten “practicing Christians.” Taylor’s (2000) dissertation tested the hypothesis that expanded orgasms (defined as intense, whole-body orgasms lasting from minutes

to hours) would produce transcendent states (pp. 254–255), which she examined by administering a self-created survey of sensory, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual items rated on a Likert scale of frequency to 44 men and women who had expanded orgasms. Sample spiritual items were: “Have you experienced psychospiritual birth?” and “Have you experienced that, as personal boundaries dissolve, you merge with the Divine?” (p. 256).

About a decade later, Little’s (2009) dissertation study replicated Wade’s (e.g., 2004) method with a saturation lesbian sample, and Elfers, also in a dissertation (2009), interviewed a small sample who had experienced transcendent states during sex and then cultivated them as a spiritual path. Similar to Taylor’s (2000) approach, Sayin (2011) administered to 47 women a survey of 72 “subjective feelings or ASC [altered state of consciousness] patterns experienced in a single, multiple, and/or prolonged ESR [expanded sexual response] orgasm” (p. 884). He did not provide the rating scale nor a statistical analysis of his findings. Not all items reflected altered-state phenomena, and many were overlapping constructs, such as: “warm feeling,” “physical warmth feeling,” and “feeling hot” (pp. 885–886). Brushing over these problems, his sample reported the following likely altered-state phenomena occurring more than 75% of the time during protracted orgasms: “depersonalization,” “sensation of flight,” “blissful, blessed feeling,” “intense love,” “intense euphoria,” “extreme excitement coming from inside,” “peaceful state of mind,” “spiritual warmth feeling,” “feeling of losing oneself totally,” “feeling of rising, moving up,” “dissolving into the partner,” “feeling the body and mind extraordinary,” and “extreme feelings of love and bursts of love to the partner” (pp. 885–886). Sayin revised and expanded the survey (2012), without correcting the above problems but adding these likely altered-state items (none defined): “cessation of time,” “distortion in space-time continuum,” “out-of-body experience,” “astral voyage,” “near-death experience,” “spreading feeling,” “losing the soul feeling,” “soul outside,” “becoming wild,” “feeling animal/animalism,” “seeing different colors,” “seeing flaring of lights,” “white or colored flashes,” “seeing different geometrical objects,” “traveling to different lands,” “voyage to unknown places,” “unifying

with environment and universe,” “déjà vu,” “unreal feeling,” “surreal feeling,” “opening into a surreal universe,” “seeing cartoon characters/short cartoon movie,” and “mystical experience” (p. 706).

To date, research of the states produced by sexual-spiritual paths, such as Taoism or Tantra, has been limited to anecdotal accounts and small studies (e.g., Bonheim, 1997; Elfers, 2009; Feuerstein, 1989, 1992, 1998; Holbrook, 2008; Kruse, 2002; Sokol, 1986, 1989) but it is consistent with the research on adventitious experiences, suggesting that much of the range of humanity’s potential for sexual spiritual experience has likely been identified.

A Systematic Review of the Empirical Literature

This systematic review was conducted in five steps (Khan, et al., 2003): framing the question; identifying relevant work and abstracting information; assessing the quality of the information; reviewing and synthesizing the results; and interpreting the findings. The primary research question was: what is empirically known about the range of spiritual experiences triggered by sex and their transformational effects? The results were interpreted considering the literature on factors that may conduce to creating sexual-spiritual experiences.

EBSCO, ProQuest, Oxford, and Taylor & Francis databases and open-source online resources were searched using a series of key words in different sections of a study report: sex, sexuality, spiritual, spiritual experience, spirituality, altered states, ecstasy, ecstatic states, transcendence, transcendent experience, peak experience, and so forth. Boolean logic “and” and “or” were employed, such as “sex” and “spirituality” and “spiritual experience” or “altered-state experience.” Titles and abstracts of all identified papers were read, and only those that represented empirical studies that included qualitative descriptions of spiritual experiences launched by sex were included; sometimes those descriptions derived from survey items developed by the authors. Out of 37 articles reviewed for inclusion, the final data set included studies by 10 authors: Elfers (2009); Holbrook (2008); Kruse (2002); Little (2009); MacKnee (2002); Ogden (2006, 2007); Sayin (2011,

2012); Sokol (1986); Taylor (2000); and Wade (1998, 2000a, 2000b, 2003a, 2004). With the exception of Ogden’s study, conducted through a national women’s magazine survey, all were purposive samples involving people who claimed to have had altered-state/spiritual experiences during sex. The sample is skewed toward women, even without certainty that Ogden’s huge number (2006) was actually all female; eliminating her sample entirely, the dataset represents the experiences of 289 individuals. Table 1 summarizes the sample composition.

The quality of the articles varied substantially in this nascent field, with much of the work done by nascent scholars, per the previous section, a commentary on the newness of the topic and its largely countercultural status. Empirical studies including any rich phenomenological descriptions of sexual spiritual experiences systematically gathered were accepted, including descriptive survey items. Information was abstracted and analyzed using the authors’ descriptions and classifications of their data and comparing them to the sexual-spiritual state classification system developed by Wade (2004) through an analytical comparison with Grof’s (1988) altered-state schema (Wade, 2000b) and White’s (1994, 2001) exceptional human experiences (EHEs; Wade, 2000b, 2003a). In qualitative studies, behavioral definitions of themes were examined and compared and qualified with the actual interview transcript quotes to assess the match between the data and the classification categories.

The Varieties of Spiritual States Triggered by Sex

The spiritual experiences are presented descriptively, in descending order of frequency.

Kundalini. Recognized in Tantric traditions, these energetic experiences appeared in all the studies (Elfers, 2009; Holbrook, 2008; Kruse, 2002; Little, 2009; MacKnee, 2002; Ogden, 2006, 2007; Sayin, 2012; Sokol, 1986; Wade, 2004, and probably Taylor, 2000). They were defined (Wade, 2004) as here-and-now, involuntary, nonordinary percepts of energy in the absence of a discernible stimulus, especially sensations of bodily heat and liquefaction, subtle force fields, illumination, unusual spontaneous movements (Tantric *mudras* and *kriyas*), and glossolalia, documented in Christian traditions. According to one of Kruse’s (2002) participants, “I feel energy bursting out of my heart and then shooting out of my hands. My hands will just really start to get very vibrant and hot” (p. 57). A woman in Ogden’s (2006) sample was “bathed in warm, golden light—light so bright I could see it through my closed eyelids...” (p. 105).

We would spontaneously start speaking in tongues....and when that started happening, it was another signal that this wave of energy is coming over us, through the different movements of my tongue or different hand gestures, perhaps mudras.—Leona (Wade, 2000b, p. 115)

Author	M	F	Total	Selection criteria
Elfers	4	4	8	Had/cultivated transcendent sexual experiences
Holbrook	4	9	13	Practiced tantric/meditational sex
Kruse	10	10	20	Practiced sacred/tantric sex
Little	0	69	69	Had altered/transcendent sexual experiences
MacKnee	5	5	10	Practicing Christians had spiritual encounters during sex
Ogden	*	*	3810	*
Sayin	0	47	47	Had expanded sexual response orgasms
Sokol	4	4	8	Practiced tantric sex
Taylor	22	22	44	Had expanded orgasms
Wade	38	53	91	Had altered-state, transcendent, mystical experienc-es during sex

Table 1. Study Sample Composition.

(Note: *Ogden did not report the sex breakout of her survey published in a national women’s magazine, nor were there any qualifications for participation)

Merging with the partner. The next most mentioned (Holbrook, 2008; Kruse, 2002; Little, 2009; MacKnee, 2002; Ogden, 2006, 2007; Sayin 2012; Sokol, 1986, 1989; Taylor, 2000; Wade, 2004) was merging with the partner, defined as a dissolution of somatic spatial boundaries and a blending of personal agency with that of the partner, so that individuals were unable to say which person was causative in the lovemaking (Wade, 2004). Frequently perception of the here-and-now shrank until the blended lovers became the complete locus of experience.

F. was laughing a little bit, then I was laughing, then she was laughing, and you couldn't tell, I mean the way we were laughing was exactly the same pitch and cadence and you lose the ability to tell where the laughing is coming from. It's not her laughter or my laughter but just laughing is happening. (#8, M.). (Kruse, 2002, p. 58)

I couldn't even tell whether I was making love to her or being made love to. I can hardly even tell you what our physical bodies were doing because it was like our bodies were part of the flow and ebb of all this energy and Spirit body. We were all mixed together in this mysterious, melting dance.... one moving, touching mass of energy and awareness, not two separate poles of consciousness....I sort of felt like a woman *and* a man...where all we were was one being, one love, kind of a melting together.—Kyle (Wade, 2000b, pp. 108–109)

Unio mystica. Unitive experiences had the same hallmarks theistic contemplative paths describe as realization: the nondual dissolution of time, space and agency sensed as a total identification with the Absolute (God; Wade, 2004). Awareness is formless, dimensionless, infinite, and suffused with light and bliss, described in Western mysticism. Little (2009) and Wade (2004) reported it, and possibly Elfers (2009), Holbrook (2008), Ogden (2006, 2007), Sokol (1986, 1989), and Taylor (2000), but even their published transcripts make it difficult to ascertain whether their participants were truly in a nondual state.

There is only a fragment of my own personal consciousness left because I feel as if I am entering God, or God is entering me, that I am blazing with the energy of God and pouring that energy back into my lover, and worshipping her and God at the same time, and then thoughts spin out and there is only That—the utterly inexpressible, the union with the Source of all, and a kind of divine annihilation.—Blake (Wade, 2001, p. 44)

Once I came out of it, I knew I had been there, but not when it happened.... Everything was dropping away, no sensory perception and there is no way to describe it. There was nothing but union in that moment, but I couldn't tell you union with what. And immediately afterward were the tears, tears of joy, incredible joy that I felt the privilege of having this incredible gratitude and awe.—Marta (Wade, 2000b, p. 117)

Transports. Transports (Wade, 2004) occurred when a person seemed to be involuntarily displaced to another location through altered visual imagery and somatic sensations of weightlessness (floating), forward motion (flying), or both through more or less recognizable terrestrial or celestial environments. Locomotion was three-dimensional, rather than planar, such as flying through outer space or swimming beneath the sea. Holbrook (2008), Kruse (2002), Little (2009), Sokol (1984), and Wade (2004) reported this phenomenon, and Sayin (2012) included descriptors of travelling to “surreal” and “cartoon landscapes” (p. 706). One of Holbrook's (2009) participants said, “I could feel myself moving and then I/we were in the center of the universe with billions of galaxies and stars” (p. 105). Another said, “First there was the feeling of plunging and then falling, and then floating and tumbling, and then seeing what was around me, the planets, and then becoming aware that I wasn't in the body” (Sokol, 1986, p. 164). Jill said, “[W]e were like dolphins in the water. I saw other fish....The water was very blue, and it was extraordinarily peaceful, joyful” (Wade, 2000b, p. 111).

Out-of-body experience (OOBE). Sexually triggered OOBEs (Wade, 2004) fit the parameters of this common altered state (e.g., Alvarado, 2001; Irwin, 1981), which occurs in the here-and-now when the sense of self and visual perspective nonvolitionally move out of the body. Ego was continuous through the realistic change in vantage point to a location outside and usually above the body, a finding reported by Elfers (2009), Holbrook (2009), Kruse (2002), Little (2009), Wade (2004), and possibly Sayin (2012).

We were... just kissing and caressing and ...I experienced myself...out of my body, above us, looking down and watching the experience...I just felt like myself, the only odd thing was I was above myself, watching myself... I was fascinated in a positive way, but also very curious as to what ... was going on. (Noel) (Little, 2009, p. 99)

One with nature. Merging with all of the natural world (Wade, 2004) was a diffuse state involving loosening of ego boundaries and agency in the here-and-now. The observing, agentic self is expanded and identified with all the natural world, erasing the “separateness” of humanity, a state described by Elfers (2009), Holbrook (2008), Ogden (2006), Sayin (2012), Taylor (2000), and Wade (2004). One of Holbrook’s participants said, “I felt connected to the universe and everything in it all at once. Yes, the universe was my body. Every being, plant, animal or mineral was inside my awareness” (p. 117). Adam in Elfers’s (2009) study said, “It was just this very intense union with everything...the trees, the wind—everything that was there” (p. 80).

Little (2009) distinguished a state called *oneness* from Wade’s (2004) *oneness with nature* characterized by a dualistic, all-encompassing state of non-separation (pp. 102–103). It is hard to tell exactly how the two states differ from this definition, but Little’s (2009) examples seem less relational and more spatial. For example, one respondent said, “I was ... being one with the universe...Warm and blissful...No boundaries...just the universal place, no space and time really” (p. 103). Another said: “I felt a tremendous amount of joy, jubilation ... my body boundaries encompassed the entire universe...I was inside everything...” (p. 103).

Trespasso. A visual hallucination common to numerous esoteric traditions, *trespasso* was defined (Wade, 2004) as involuntarily perceiving another face, head, or succession of faces or heads (usually but not always human) superimposed on the lover’s in the here-and-now. People usually interpreted them as the partner’s past-life personalities (e.g., Kruse, 2002; Ogden, 2006; Wade, 2004), or a more perfect, younger, or archetypal divine version of the partner (Little, 2009; Sokol, 1986; Wade, 2004). For example, Vivian saw “my lover’s face morph into all these different faces. [There] might be 20 different faces...some are more memorable than others, so I’d recognize them when they came up again” (Wade, 2000b, pp. 114–115).

I am going to be sixty-five this year ([and my partner is] fifty-three) and when we make love, I feel like we are in a time warp, he just looks so young. It’s... like we started our lives together in our twenties instead of our fifties. (#6, M.) (Kruse, 2002, p. 58)

Magical connections to nature. This classification (Wade, 2004) refers to entrained, shared agency with entities in the natural world perceived to possess their own intelligence, which was blended with the participant’s sense of self. One woman “became” “a starry night” (Ogden, 2006, p. 93), another woman felt herself and her lover becoming the redwood trees that surrounded them (Little, 2009, p. 97). Some of Taylor’s (2000) and Sayin’s (2012) survey items suggest this state.

Shapeshifting. Shapeshifting (Wade, 2004) was a form of possession in which individuals in the here-and-now experienced an involuntary alteration in their sense of self and agency being taken over by another, typically an animal. Mentation altered with such vividness that the body was perceived to have changed appearance and proprioception, most often during rough sex. Sayin (2012), Sokol (1986), and Little (2009) reported this phenomenon, which is similar to states cultivated in hunting, theatre, martial arts, warfare (Farrer, 2009, 2014), and shamanic traditions (e.g., Cebrián, 2010; Howard, 2014; Vélez, 2015; Winkelman, 2010).

With that [electrical charge sensation] comes a power and a strength that makes me feel

invincible, like [I] could run through the woods and jump over trees any time now.... If I'm the wolf, my hips and butt and legs, especially the tops of my legs where the quadriceps are, feel different. Definitely leaner, sinewy—...kind of like a haunch sort of a musculature so you could spring. When I'm a wolf, it seems easier to move and jump about, and when I'm a bear, it doesn't. As the bear, I feel the weight of the head, really, really big, and very, very heavy.—Kim. (Wade, 2000b, p. 110)

The Third Presence. Using a phenomenological construct by Jungian analyst John R. Haule (1990), Wade (2004) classified the felt sense of an autonomous, invisible, intelligent, impersonal field or force that seemed to exist between the lovers and arise from their union as a Third Presence. The Third seemed to be co-created by the partners' interaction but impervious to deliberate manipulation. It occurred in the here-and-now with intact agency and normal causality. The Third was variously a sacred entity, such as the Holy Ghost; a hallowed atmosphere of beatific sensations and emotions; and a beneficent state of mind, likened to a state of grace. MacKnee's (2002) Christian sample described it as the presence of God felt as an "intimate friend" and a "loving, caring parent" (p. 238). One participant said, "I'm praying and God is talking to me and we're having sex at the same time" (p. 237).

I don't mean... looking upon my partner as being sacred, something more than that. It felt like the two of us have entered into a communion with something much larger than either one of us. Or even both of us together. (C.S.) (Little, 2009, p. 98)

Visions. Visions were subjective, nonvolitional imagery of entities superimposed on the here-and-now distinct from the person's mentation, though they did not overtake the psyche (Wade, 2004). The entities were human (usually dead loved ones) or supernatural beings, interpreted as angels, demons, or deities, a finding reported also by Ogden (2006) and Little (2009). Sayin's (2012) sample additionally reported seeing geometric

patterns and shapes, common to ingesting hallucinogens, such as peyote and psilocybin.

I saw a vision of my uncle's sister, who was the original owner of this cabin, she and her husband. The sense...was that they were very happy that there was so much love in the place where they'd spent time together...The whole experience was very moving...I don't normally see people who have passed away. (Kelly M) (Little, 2009, p. 94)

All of a sudden, I heard this horrible roar... and a serpent came out of the water, the rainbow serpent, and he dived back in and I could never quite see its head, but I could see its body where it came in and out and in and out. It was frightful and beautiful, shimmery, very bright.—Natasha (Wade, 2000b, p. 116)

Past lives. Past lives involved the involuntary sense of being transported to different, past locations in the bodies and personae of other individuals (Wade, 2004; cf., Kruse 2002, Little, 2009; possibly Elfers, 2009). Participants identified with their alter-egos, some of whom were believed to be their direct lineal ancestors, moving through detailed biographical events. These experiences often had unhappy endings. Although Kruse's sample (2002) reported insight about the past lives at the time ("Both of us could see our past lifetimes together and just what this relationship meant," p. 57), Wade's (2004) participants did not. During sex on their second date a couple relived Victorian-era lives in which they fell in love, had an adulterous affair that resulted in a pregnancy, lost the child, and split up. The couple consciously rejected reincarnation and found the whole experience distressing. They married, but after many years were separating at the time of the interview.

The story was dictating to us, like watching a movie, and you don't get to change it if you don't like what's going on....I didn't see any similarity in it with us at that time, though it did

say something about why we felt so compelled to be together...why we felt so familiar, like we'd always been together.... The rational part of me dismissed it. [Now] I believe we were given an opportunity to be with each other in a different context, but we haven't been able to do it. We made the wrong choices again in this lifetime. It's too painful to continue.—Carolyn (Wade, 2004, p. 113)

The Void. Wade's (2004) construct of the Void was taken from Eastern, nontheistic contemplative traditions. Void experiences involved impersonal nonduality of time, space and agency sensed as the primordial emptiness that underlies yet constitutes the cosmos. It is a formless, dimensionless, infinite awareness that may or may not be accompanied by light and bliss. Little (2009) identified this state, and Holbrook (2008) and Taylor (2000) may have, though their data are not unequivocally nondualistic.

There was no such thing as any of these things except for that space I was in, and it was kind of the whole idea of being there now but it was just like black space...I had no understanding of me,...no ego ... there's nothing... it's even before beginner's mind, beyond beginner's mind, really nothing... everything that I knew about reality, the world, was gone. It didn't mean a thing... There was nothing in my head, my head was an empty space.... (Lola) (Little, 2009, p. 101)

There was this dissolvingness, and this losing of boundaries. And then there was this incredible nothingness and everythingness. Out of this feeling of nothingness and no-self, there was yet all possibility and all potentiality....no time and no space.... an awareness of something and nothing all at the same time....There was just a more complete sense of really pure awareness, just no sense of self. The completeness of the nothingness was enormous.—Ann (Wade, 2000b, p. 117)

Clairsentience. In clairsentience (Wade, 2004), a fully developed cognitive revelation seemed to come from nowhere. People variously described it as “knowing everything” and “realizing the truth” (p. 275). Typically the revealed knowledge concerned sudden comprehension of previously hidden relationship dynamics, usually negative. Despite that, the revelation was accompanied by feelings of inner strength, resilience, and resolution. Some experiences suggested precognition. For example, a woman who was delightedly resuming a relationship that had been suspended for years, suddenly saw the future:

The feeling was of liberation... opening to another unknown dimension of experience.... I was lifted into a dimension of truth beyond ordinary rational understanding, wherein I knew it [current vision of the relationship] to be the realm of false hope. The disjunction of this overwhelming feeling ... was not at all upsetting. There was a refreshing calm that ... stayed with me for days.—Leah (Wade, 2000b, p. 114)

Holbrook (2008) possibly mentioned this phenomenon, and Little (2009) identified it.

Telepathy. Telepathy, the ability to access the unspoken thoughts and feelings of others (Wade, 2004), occurred in normal spatio-temporal and agentic conditions. Respondents mentioned verifying their telepathic insights with the person involved, usually the partner. Kruse (2002) and Little (2009) reported this effect. “I heard her speak in her voice but her lips didn't move, I'm looking at her, I thought this is really kind of odd, and it kept happening....we were able to read each other's minds....” (Little, 2009, pp. 99–100). In one case (Wade, 2000b), a man making love with his date at a party suddenly knew that his best friend, also at the party, needed help.

I went into an emptiness, and ... an awareness came to me that Tom was in danger.... So I immediately came back into my body....

I started running down the street throwing on my clothes....As soon as I turn the corner, there's this mob of people. In the center of it was Tom and this

huge Hell's Angels type of guy brawling with him. Without hesitation—and I'm just a little guy—I lunged. I just jumped on this guy's back, trying to get him in a headlock. He was a huge, huge fellow.... but I just had this tremendous energy.... That evening, Tom said, "You should really be hurting".... I was not bruised or in any kind of physical pain out of the experience, during it or afterward.—Esteban (Wade, 2000b, pp. 111–112)

Channeling. Similar to Grof's (1975, 1985) *group identification* or *group consciousness*, Wade used *channeling* for the here-and-now sense of having the psyches, especially the emotional experiences, of a nameless group of people pour through the person in a manner that resonated with the individual's experience but was clearly not their own, a phenomenon also reported by Little (2009).

They feel like they're very, very close, all women. Not an identity, but *all women*. My identity falls away, and I'm identified with all women now and back in time, and their state of mind. There's not a separation.... A sense of rapture that came from so many different places, and how wonderful it was to have that...and that sense of unity [with all women].—Kristin (Wade, 2000b, p.109)

Deity possession. In Wade's (2004) study, people in the here-and-now reported divinities overtaking and displacing their psyches and agency. These invisible forces gave a distinct impression of supernatural personification with fierce archetypal beings associated with sex, such as Kali and Pan. According to a man who said Dionysus or Shiva had possessed him,

We watched ourselves in ecstasy... because we were no longer ourselves. We were whirling furies of wind and air. We clashed and mingled against the walls, the bookcases, the filing cabinets...I insist that the lover, the artist, the dancer, wasn't me, wasn't my person, wasn't my transperson or my subperson or any form of a person. (Wade, 2004, pp. 107–108)

Boundlessness. In addition to the states identified in Wade's (2004) study, Little (2009)

identified a state she called *boundlessness* (pp. 103–104), which she likened to Ogden's (2006) description that "you're able to move through the boundaries that keep you separate from the energies of the universe" (p. 104), and similar experiences also appeared in Holbrook's (2009) and Sokol's (1986) samples of Tantric practitioners, all suggesting that boundlessness involves a sense of spatial expansion of the self beyond the body extending in all directions.

[My boundaries] were very fluid...[they] would expand and contract depending on what [my partner] was doing...But [my boundaries] didn't really extend beyond the space we were [in], but they expanded to just the inside of the walls of the room or the case of being in a tent, just expanded to a small circumference outside. (JM) (Little, 2009, pp. 104)

Others expanded into much larger spaces, such as this woman: "[I] exploded into some being that was 40 miles big and...[my lover] was at least 40 miles big, we took up all the space" Sokol (1986, p. 159).

Little (2009) identified three further categories that may uniquely reflect her lesbian sample and have not yet been reported by other researchers:

Sex as spirituality. According to Little (2009), this state involves a deep reverence for the partner without merging. It is not clear that agency or spatio-temporal perception changed in particular ways, but her examples suggested a sense of participation in a sacred act or archetypal feminine force.

When I am...the love maker...I go into a triumph-like state, and...it feels like an act of worship, not to the woman I'm making love to but also kind of maybe femininity in general... woman-kind, the Goddess, the source of life. It feels like I'm making love to life itself.... like me and the sacred rite, in our universe.... (Lucy) (Little, 2009, p. 105)

[I]t was probably like people feel or should feel when they go to church. A sense of being in... the presence of something very special... It's like feeling we were in touch with something eternal,

something that didn't have a beginning and didn't have an end, and whatever happened...it lasted forever... Absolute love, reverence, acceptance, really feeling I was... touching God, something sacred... (C.S.) (Little, 2009, p. 105)

The feminine. Experiences of the feminine (Little, 2009)—although not technically altered-state phenomena—“allowed the women to open to and thereby own previous unknown aspects of themselves,” their femininity (p. 105). The narratives suggest that was enabled by having their partners be masculine without being male. The sense of self perhaps changed, even if agency did not.

It felt like she was holding masculine energy and I was holding feminine energy. Neither of us intended it...She was doing the protecting and holding while I was doing the surrendering...We were being shown these aspects of ourselves that we didn't even know were there or we didn't know how to access, and we weren't intentionally trying to access. It was just drawn forward out of us, and it was just so profound for each of us to be in touch with those parts of ourselves and to have those parts of ourselves in communion with one another. (Little, 2009, S.C) (p. 106)

She was also really masculine. It really increased my sense of femininity... She could tell me anything, and I mean that in this way of like you're my bitch, you're my whore, you're my lover, you're my sister, you're my mother, all of it, all of it together...I could be all of these things in this sacred sexuality, an archetypical female with all of these different aspects... even... Kali the destroyer... (Kelly) (Little, 2009, p. 106)

Gender Bending. Gender bending was defined (Little, 2009) as a woman's ownership of her or her lover's masculine qualities as a way to access and own previously unknown aspects of themselves to come to completion in a complementary way to *the feminine* above. Her examples suggested a strong somatic percept of a sex change to owning a penis.

She was on top of me., and it felt like I was making love to masculinity...Then we talked about it – kind of surprised that we both felt the same way. She felt she actually had a penis, and we...decided she does have a masculine alter ego, personality, energy, which we call Richard, and I think that Richard is present in different times... (Mo) (Little, 2009, p. 112)

We connect on a whole different level... In the circumstances where my masculine energy comes out, it's more deep, more spiritualIt feels like I have a penis, right where my clitoris is...coming up on my abdomen until it's erect. It's not any different than feeling I have a finger or toeIt's a part of me...I can tell sensations...the way she's contracting the muscles and vagina. I get that whole sensation when I ejaculate and it kind of goes limp...We were way more connected [than when I was wearing a strap-on]. (Erma) (Little, 2009, p. 113)

Table 2 summarizes the sexual spiritual states identified by each author.

The Transformational Effects of Sexual Spiritual States

The sexual altered states changed lives, completing the criteria for a spiritual experience (Hinterkopf, 1994; Mencken et al., 2009; May, 1974; Myers & Willard, 2003; Prest & Keller, 1993; Selvey, 1977). Of course, the sexual-spiritual revisionist paths like neo-Tantra and neo-Taoism are based on transformation, and claims include the following benefits: overcoming sexual shame and oppression; improving orgasmic ability; increasing connectedness with partners and relationship satisfaction; enhancing spirituality; using the relationship as an avenue for personal and couple growth; and augmenting connectedness with humanity at large (e.g., Feuerstein, 1992, 1998; Judy, 2015; Reid, 1989; Richardson, 2003). Although some authors (Kruse, 2002; Sayin, 2011, 2012) in the sample did not explore changes resulting from sexual spiritual experiences, many included at least some. The experiences in this systematic review

	Elfers	Holbrook	Kruse	Little	MacKnee	Ogden	Savin	Sokol	Taylor	Wade
Kundalini	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	?	X
Merging	?	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Unio		?		X				?	?	X
Transports	X	X	X	X			X	X		X
OOBE	X	X	X	X			?			X
One w/ Nature		X	X	X			X		X	X
Trespasso				X				X		X
Connect to Nature							X		X	X
Shapeshift				X			X			X
Third				X	X	X		X		X
Visions				X		X	X			X
Past Lives	?		X	X						X
Void		?		X						X
Clairsentience		X		X						X
Boundlessness		X		X						X
Telepathy				X						
Channeling				X						X
Deity Possesion										X
Sex as Spirituality				X						X
Feminine				X						
Gender Bending				X						

Table 2. Sexual Spiritual State Frequency by Author.

produced the following transformational sequelae (summarized in Table 3):

Conviction that Spirit is real and present, variously expressed (Elfers, 2009; Little, 2009; MacKnee, 2002; Ogden, 2006, 2007; Sokol, 1986; Taylor, 2000; Wade, 2004). Usually the sexually produced altered states had no relationship to a person's spiritual beliefs or practices, such as meditation. For example, Buddhists or atheists might have an experience they interpreted as the Christian Holy Ghost, or Jews might be visited by Kali. Dissonance was common (Wade, 2004) and often disruptive, leading to a spiritual quest to understand what had occurred and involving changes in beliefs. When the altered-state phenomena could be interpreted through the person's existing belief system, they tended to strengthen it (Holbrook, 2008; MacKnee, 2002). In Elfers's (2009) study, this involved a metaphysical shift to perceiving the cosmos as having a living, erotic quality balanced between masculine and feminine poles reminiscent of Taoism. For MacKnee's Christian sample (2002),

it took the form of affirming beliefs and trust in God, deeper knowledge of God, and gratitude.

Enhanced relationships, especially greater connection with the partner, decreased defensiveness and increased compassion, which were extended to relationships with others and with nature (Elfers, 2009; Holbrook 2008; Little, 2009; MacKnee, 2002; Ogden, 2006, 2007; Taylor, 2000; Wade, 2004). Elfers (2009) included healing connections with something larger than the self, also implied by Ogden (2006, 2007).

Empowerment and purpose, including feeling confident, revitalized, and motivated to help self and others realize more completeness in sexuality and spirituality (Elfers, 2009; Little, 2009; MacKnee, 2002; Ogden, 2006, 2007; Sokol, 1986; Taylor, 2000; Wade, 2004).

Healing, including the resolution of internal conflict, especially: self-acceptance and loss of shame around sexuality, sexual identity, and gender issues (Elfers, 2009; Holbrook

	Elfers	Holbrook	Little	MacKnee	Ogden	Sokol	Taylor	Wade
Spiritual conviction	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Enhanced relationships	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
Empowerment and purpose	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Healing								
Self-acceptance	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
Resolve sexual dysfunction	X	X	X	X	X			X
Resolve loss				X				
Integrate sex and spirituality	X	X	X	X	X			X
Intentional sexual behavior			X					X
Personal growth								
Expand genderedness	X	X	X		X		X	X
Creativity							X	
Paranormal abilities						X		X

Table 3. Transformational Effect Frequency by Author.

2008; Little, 2009; MacKnee, 2002; Ogden, 1999, 2006, 2007; Taylor, 2000; Wade, 2004); resolution of sexual dysfunction, especially associated with a history of sexual trauma (Elfers, 2009; Holbrook 2008; Little, 2009; MacKnee, 2002; Ogden, 2006, 2007; Wade, 2004); and the resolution of personal loss (MacKnee, 2002). This category also included integrating sexuality and spirituality counter to cultural norms that split the two (Elfers, 2009; Holbrook 2008; Little, 2009; MacKnee, 2002; Ogden, 2006, 2007; Wade, 2004), which promoted more intentional sexual behavior, such as eliminating promiscuity and unfaithfulness in monogamous relationships (Little, 2009; Wade, 2004).

Personal growth, a category featuring positive changes, such as discarding limiting beliefs, ceasing dysfunctional behavior, and quitting unsupportive relationships. It also involved acquiring new capabilities, such as broadening one's understanding and embodiment of gender (Elfers, 2009; Holbrook 2008; Little, 2009; Ogden, 2006, 2007; Sokol, 1986; Taylor, 2000; Wade, 2004), greater mental clarity and creativity (Taylor, 2000), and paranormal abilities, such as the ability to perceive subtle energies and conduct energetic healing (Sokol, 1986; Wade, 2004).

As with other transformational experiences, not all the sexual spiritual events were

pleasant (Wade, 2004; cf., Bragdon, 1988, 1990). Even when they were interpreted as positive, they often challenged the person's most basic assumptions and produced unwelcome results. Some found that loved ones were not supportive of their experience or how they changed. Sometimes people feared they were going crazy and had good reason to think so: frightening percepts sometimes emerged with overwhelming intensity (Elfers, 2009; Little, 2009; Wade, 2004). Some experiences brought unconscious material dramatically into awareness, and people often found it difficult to process, sometimes resulting in psychological regression and psychotic symptoms. Furthermore, the intense energies associated with kundalini, once activated, did not always "turn off" after sex (Wade, 2004), making people feel physically and mentally ill. Finally, the intensity of altered-state sex spoiled some people for normal lovemaking (Elfers, 2009; Little, 2009; Wade, 2004). Extreme cases involved addiction to the "high" of altered-state sex, leading to selfish, exploitative connections or to clinging to dysfunctional relationships to maintain access to ecstatic sex (Wade, 2004). In Little's (2009) sample, some women shunned new relationships that did not produce transcendent experiences or remained single and celibate, hopeless of having such a connection again. Some of Elfers's (2009) participants turned to polyamory to increase their odds of having altered-state sex.

What Conduces to Sexual Spiritual Experiences?

Sexual spiritual experiences occur in three conditions: as an innate capacity activated during a wide range of sexual relationships and behaviors; during prolonged orgasms; through deliberate cultivation of energetic, physical, and contemplative practices. It was not clear, in some studies, exactly which conditions prevailed, so the results were examined in the context of data from the sample studies, the larger sample of 37 related articles and relevant theoretical literature. Major contributors to sexual spiritual experiences appear to be:

Partner dynamics. Certain psychological connections may prefigure altered-state sex and account for the tendency to have transcendent experiences with one particular partner (Wade, 2004). Respondents mentioned electric connections when sparks seemed to fly between two people (“love at first sight,” “incredible chemistry,” “magical” connections); ecstatic precognitive visions and preternatural recognition of a partner; and so forth (p. 243), a finding elaborated in Sundberg’s (2019) study of cases of “extreme falling in love,” which tended to produce ecstatic sex. In such circumstances, the sexual altered states frequently began long before and/or in the absence of coitus. Primal pre- and perinatal enmeshment with womb siblings or caretakers may be unconsciously reactivated by certain partners, conducing to pre-egoic states of boundless, ecstatic eroticism and merging (Wade, 2004), an interpretation congruent with psychological theories of sexual attraction (e.g., Bókkon, et al., 2014; Grof 1975, 1985, 1988; Hayton, 2011; Tart, 1972, 1975, 1976). Other relational dynamics included lack of inhibition (Wade, 2004), which occurred in opposite conditions: being with a highly trusted partner in a loving relationship or having transient sex with strangers, both of which enabled behavioral and psychological abandonment without fear of judgment. Other forms of letting go of control, notably being the passive partner, promoted altered states (Wade, 2004), likely related to dynamics involved in the popularly recognized altered state in bondage-domination-sadism-masochism (BDSM) called “sub[mission] space,” still lacking a coherent definition (e.g., Baker, 2016; Iser, 2000; Marion, 2016).

Spiritual States Triggered by Sex

Extended sexual stimulation. Taoism and Tantra employ prolonged sexual engagement (e.g., Judy, 2015; Krishna, 1971, 1972a,b, 1975; Mumford, 2005; Richardson, 2003; Van Gulik, 1974), which featured prominently in Holbrook’s (2009), Kruse’s (2002), and Sokol’s (1986) studies. It was not possible to determine what produced the amplified orgasms in Sayin’s (2011, 2012) and Taylor’s (2000) studies. Extended arousal with repetitive stimuli, such as movement, helps relax and exhaust defenses, and extinguish some sensory pathways while elevating others in ways that produce absorption. Lesbians spend more time in sex play than heterosexual lovers, which may account for their relative ease in having ecstatic sex (Blair, & Pukall, 2014; Cohen, & Byers, 2014; Garcia, et al., 2014). Researchers have begun exploring the psychophysiology of prolonged sex, including its production of spiritual imagery (e.g., d’Aquili, 2000; Jevning et al., 1996; Laughlin, et al., 1992). According to Safron (2016), prolonged rhythmic activity produces trance and orgasm, which created an evolutionary advantage. He speculated that synchronous activity within a person’s nervous system and between the nervous systems of partners would intensify sexual experience via greater neural excitement; increase attention from integrating multimodal neural streams augmenting one another; and maximally drive neural systems for somatic reward and response. Thus, synchronous rhythms synergistically facilitate pleasure, support absorption (which enhances the vividness of awareness), and entrain brain oscillations to amplify sexual stimulation. Such mutually reinforcing and magnifying loops heighten pleasure and “may specifically be driven by a synchrony-facilitated state of sensory absorption leading to trance” (para. 19).

Personal neurological qualities. Some people have greater ease reaching altered states than others. One reason is having naturally thinner boundaries separating objective and subjective realities (Hartmann, 1991; cf. Cardeña, et al., 2015; Kelley, 2010; Roxburgh & Roe, 2011). Likewise, some people can more easily become absorbed in one aspect of experience without distraction than others, which conduces to altered states (e.g., Scantling & Browder, 1993; Vaitl, et al., 2013).

Cultivating the capacity for absorption is central to Tantric and Taoist paths (e.g., Holbrook, 2008; Judy, 2015; Krishna, 1975; Mumford, 2005; Richardson, 2003; Van Gulik, 1974). Other factors, including physical and emotional fatigue (MacKnee, 2002; Wade, 2004) and pain (e.g., Baker, 2016; Iser, 2000; Marion, 2016) that exhaust the nervous system conduce to altered states by relaxing normal ego defenses.

Controlling energy. As noted, Tantric and Taoist practices involve the deliberate manipulation of libidinal energy. Practitioners learn to channel that energy into their erogenous zones, those of their lover, and into “higher” energy centers, especially those associated with the heart, pineal, and crown chakras for different types of sexual and spiritual realization (e.g., Krishna, 1971, 1972a,b, 1975; Richardson, 2003), techniques mentioned in Holbrook’s (2009), Kruse’s (2002), and Sokol’s (1986) data.

Human neurophysiology. Human bodies are wired for transcendent experiences. Natural, naive sexual activity includes the behaviors cultivated and refined in spiritual practices to bring about exalted states, such as: the rhythmic movements of trance-dancing, repetitive vocalizations of chant, altered breathing patterns of yoga, overstimulation of some sensory pathways and deprivation of others of meditation, energetic arousal of Tantric yoga, and the absorption of access meditation. Although most research focuses on the physiology of orgasm and its neurological correlates (e.g., Huynh, et al, 2013; King, et al., 2011; Komisaruk, et al., 2006) rather than the phenomenology, materialist arguments hold fairly well for sexually produced spiritual states, even including the “God-spot” theories seeking to reduce transcendent experiences to certain neural networks (e.g., Delio, 2003; Joseph, 2001; Newberg, 2010; Persinger, et al., 2010). Such views are buttressed by the neuropsychopharmacology of sex, argued to produce a high similar to the effects of psychoactive drugs. During sex, the following neurochemicals are released at much higher than baseline quantities: norepinephrine (Stahl, 2001), dopamine (Brown, et al., 2007; Kruger, et al., 2006; Passie, et al., 2005; Stahl, 2001), prolactin (Kruger, et al., 2002; Kruger, et al., 2005; Passie, et al., 2005), endogenous opiate

peptides (Argiolas & Melis, 2003), serotonin (Brown et al., 2007; Stahl, 2001), and oxytocin (Argiolas & Melis, 2003; Kruger, et al., 2006; Passie, et al., 2005; Stahl, 2001). According to Safron (2016), sexually heightened dopamine and norepinephrine mimic the effects of cocaine, with orgasm mimicking the addition of heroin to the mix owing to the analgesia caused by elevated oxytocin and vasopressin, plus the addition of serotonergic-glutamatergic interactions found in the effects of hallucinogens, such as psilocybin, lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), mescaline, and N,N-dimethyltryptamine (DMT; Griffiths, et al., 2008; Griffiths, et al., 2012). In other words, the intense pleasure of orgasm comes from a naturally occurring, probably opioid-dominated neurochemical complex, which may be amplified by endogenous mind-altering neurochemicals similar to those of ingestible hallucinogens. According to this model, extended arousal and orgasm would conduce to spiritual experiences during lovemaking.

Discussion

Simplistic appeals to brain chemistry as causation do not account for all the sexual spiritual experience data, any more than they account for all the data associated with other altered states (e.g., Greyson, 2010; Jastrzebski, 2018; Volk, 2011). Countervailing evidence for sexual spiritual experiences includes the partner dynamics: people’s going into ecstatic states prior to or not involving coitus and/or orgasm. Altered-state sex, in the way it happens under all kinds of conditions, resembles the near-death experience (NDE), probably the best researched adventitious altered state today, which also occurs under widely varying conditions, such as trauma, disease, and drug overdose (including times when the brain is measurably not functioning)—conditions that in no way affect NDE phenomenology (e.g., Agrillo, 2011; Cardeña, 2010; Greyson, 2010; Liang, 2018). A considerable body of other evidence suggests some form of non-locality associated with spiritual experiences (e.g., Braud, 2003; Di Biase, 2009; Stapp, 2015; Dossey’s [2014] construct of non-locality appears flawed). To some extent, ecstatic states may always be mysterious or at least involve dimensions that cannot be explained by conventional Western materialism.

The fact that sex can take people to the same altered-state realms as trance, meditation, drugs, and other conditions suggests that the phenomenal worlds of human experience fall into certain universal patterns that may be physiologically determined. The human body may be built for transcendence but have only a fixed range of ecstatic possibilities. No matter what starts the journey, there are only so many “destinations.” It is the timing, context, and idiosyncratic content of the experiences—aside from their universal structure—that give them the power to change lives. Their very physicality and relational quality make sexually produced experiences seem more compelling than those produced by other spiritual practices, according to naïve practitioners:

Way more intense than anything like meditation.... Like the arc lights are turned on, much brighter, clearer, much more happening... . It's engaging the body ...this really physical thing happening at the same time as a spiritual experience. ... seems a lot stronger and brighter.—Paul. (Wade, 2001a, p. 47)

Sex felt like six different meditation practices...all happening at the same time....this multifaceted thing that...all aspects of my being, emotionally, physically, sexually, intellectually, spiritually were engaged and it's the first time every aspect of me could feel completely engaged in an integral, transformative practice.—Ranier. (Wade, 2001a, p. 47)

Spiritual adepts have said the same thing. Sex is a potent source of spiritual experience.

If anyone wonders how Jesus raised the dead, don't try to explain the miracle.
Kiss me on the lips.
Like this. Like this.—Rumi (Hamill, 1996, p. 78)

Rinzai's disciples never got the Zen message,
But I, the Blind Donkey, know the truth:
Love play can make you immortal.
The autumn breeze of a single night of love is
better than a hundred thousand years of sterile
sitting meditation....—Ikkyu (Stevens, 2003, p. 75)

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