The Sexual-Self: Phenomenological approaches to Gender Identity and Sexuality

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Abstract

The fluidity of gender along with sexual fluidity and flexibility indicate that sexual attraction may exist and vary within a spectrum or a flux changing during the life. On the other hand, scientists distinguished two understandings of the 'self', the self as "Me" and the self as "I". "Me" corresponds to the self as an object of experience, while "I" reflects the self as a subject of experience. The phenomenology of human sexuality provides a trans-disciplinary basis where we can create a synthesis of the various perspectival approaches to the subject. We suggested a 'Sexual-Self' model, comprised from the 'Sexual-Me" component, corresponding to 'Gender Identity', and the 'Sexual-I' component, corresponding to 'Sexuality' - including 'Sexual Preference and Orientation'. We also suggested different scientific concepts and domains that can help understanding the existence and the processes of 'Sexual-Self' throughout the life.

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Gender and sexual fluidity

The expression 'gender identity' was coined in the middle 1960s, describing one's 'persistent inner sense of belonging to either the male and female gender category' (Money,1994). The American Psychological Association described it as the person's basic sense of being male, female, or of indeterminate sex. The concept of gender identity evolved over time to include those people who do not identify either as female or male: a "person's self-concept of their gender (regardless of their biological sex) is called their gender identity" (Lev, 2004).

Since the 1990's the word 'transgender' has been used primarily as an umbrella term to describe those people who defy societal expectations and assumptions regarding gender. It includes people who are transsexual and intersex, but also those who identify outside the female/male binary and those whose gender expression and behavior differs from social expectations (Moleiro & Pinto, 2015). Lined up with a position of 'gender variance and fluidity', changes in the diagnostic systems in the last few decades reflect a broader respect and value of the diversity of human sexuality and of gender expressions. This position recognizes that practices coming from the (mental) health field may lead to changes in the broader cultural beliefs (Drescher, 2012).

The fluidity of gender along with sexual fluidity and flexibility (homo-flexible, hetero-flexible) are newer terms, meaning that sexual attraction may exist and vary within a spectrum or a flux potentially changing over time (Moleiro & Pinto, 2015). Gender and sexual orientation may vary and be flexible over time in longitudinal flux. Sexual preferences, attitudes, behaviours, and identity can be flexible to some degree as per the sexual plasticity model. Sexual fluidity can occur in people who are heterosexual or homosexual and experience a change in their sexual response (Ventriglio & Bhugra, 2019) (Figure 1).
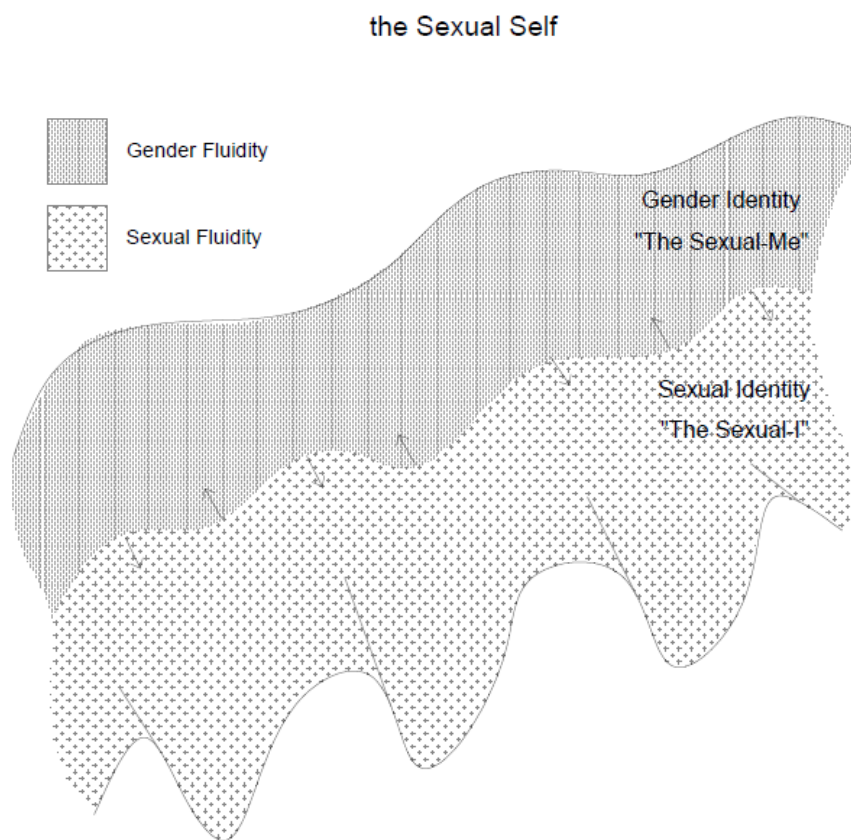

Figure 1. Illustration of the fluctuation and fluidity of both Gender Identity (the Sexual-'Me') and Sexuality, including Sexual Orientation (the Sexual-'I'), as well as their constant interaction, throughout the life. Gender Identity manifests less fluctuation, compared to sexuality, although they both contain a constant, dynamic, and interacting fluidity.

'Sexual self-concept' is the cognitive perspective on the sexual aspects of "self" and refers to the perception of a person as a sexual creature. Sexual self-concept takes into consideration a multitude of personal cognitive aspects of sexuality (e.g., sexual self-schemas, sexual motivation) and has been described as the core of one's sexual self. 'Sexual self-schemas' are defined as an individual's cognitive generalizations that are perceived to be essential aspects of their sexual self (Rye, 2023). The cognitive generalizations are theorized to develop from early sexual experiences and are expressed in current sexual behaviors through sexually relevant social information. For example, a previous sexual experience that resulted in embarrassment may lead the individual to believe "I am sexually inadequate". An individual's thoughts related to their 'sexual self' are influenced by their observation, experiences, and discovery of their sexual behaviors, emotions, attitudes, and beliefs. The schematic representation of sexuality provides individuals with judgments, decisions, inferences, predictions, and behaviors about their current and future sexual self (Andersen & Cyranowski, 1994).

Positive sexual self-schemas can lead individuals to experience positive emotions and behaviors in intimate relationships. Examples of positive sexual self-schemas are loving, romantic, kind, good-natured and sympathetic. In contrast, negative

sexual self-schemas can lead individuals to experience negative emotions and behaviors in intimate relationships. An individual with negative self-schemas reported higher levels of embarrassment or conservatism about sexual experiences. In addition, negative self-schemas may lead individuals to describe themselves as unromantic, self-conscious and not confident in a sexual context. Sexual self-schemas can change as a result of a sexual assault because an individual generalizes the negative emotions towards future sexual experiences. Negative attitudes and values about sexual matters can lead individuals to base their self-views on the thoughts of others (Andersen & Cyranowski, 1994).

Phenomenological aspects of the 'Self'

James (1890) distinguished two understandings of the self, the self as "Me" and the self as "I". "Me" corresponds to the self as an object of experience (self as object), while "I" reflects the self as a subject of experience (self as subject). These two categories are mutually exclusive, i.e., if something is an object of experience then it cannot simultaneously be a subject of experience, and vice versa. The "Me" is defined as the totality of all content of consciousness that is experienced as self-related. James (1890) chose the word "Me" to refer to 'self-as-object'. He meant physical objects and cultural artifacts (material self), human beings (social self), and mental processes and content (spiritual self), which are all valid categories of 'self-as-object'. It can be illustrated with sensory experiences. For example, in the visual domain, I experience an image of my face as different from another person's face. Hence, while the image of my face belongs to "Me," the image of someone else does not. The same can be said about the contents of thoughts and feelings, which can be either about "Me" or about something/someone else (Wozniak, 2018).

Characterizing 'self-as-object' as a subset of conscious experiences specifies the building blocks of "Me", which are contents of consciousness, and provides a guiding principle for distinguishing between 'self' and 'non-self'. Distinction between self and non-self is often a matter of scale rather than a binary classification. We may also discuss on subcategories of the self by imposing additional constraints on the type of conscious content that is taken into account, as well as the nature of self-relatedness (e.g., whether it is ownership of, agency over, authorship, etc.). According to Wozniak (2018), the distinction between "I" and "Me," suggests that these two theoretical issues should be investigated independently, using two different methodologies. While "Me" can be investigated using phenomenology and scientific methodology, "I" is typically a metaphysical problem and it is arguable whether it can be approached using standard scientific methods.

According to Wittgenstein (1958), there is the "I", which suggest the self-as-subject (for example, "**I** see me in the mirror"), and the "Me" as object (for example, "I see **Me** in the mirror"). Moreover, one may use terms, such as "sense of ownership over an experience" to reflect what is meant by "I" in the Wittgensteinian tradition, or, e.g., "sense of ownership of interoceptive signals" when discussing the role of interoception. Also, we may think about it as the distinction between the experience/sense of "Me" versus the experience/sense of "I" (rather than just "Me" and "I"). In this case we have to prove that there is a qualitative difference between them, and to demarcate the exact border (Table 1).

Table 1. The Wittgensteinian experience/sense of "Me" vs the experience/sense of "I"

the "I", as subject	the "Me" as object
examples	*examples*
"**I** see me in the mirror"	"I see **Me** in the mirror"
"**I** see me in the future"	"I see **Me** in the future"
"**I** see me as a female"	"I see **Me** as a female"

Conscious states are hybrid states that involve the reciprocal interaction between relatively allocentric and relatively egocentric representations. Thus, a conscious state is composed of a pair of representations interacting at the Allocentric-Egocentric Interface. What a person is conscious of is determined by what the contributing allocentric and egocentric representations are representations of. The phenomenal character of conscious states is identical to the representational content of the reciprocally interacting egocentric and allocentric representations. Chalmers (1995) recommends the term 'awareness' for 'physical' processes in the brain (his 'easy' problems), and 'consciousness' for the experience which 'arises' from them (his 'hard' problem). Analysis of consciousness has impressed upon investigators the need to partition the term into a variety of types and subtypes—for example, access consciousness, phenomenal consciousness, state consciousness, primary consciousness, temporal consciousness, core consciousness, reflective consciousness, sentience, noetic awareness, autonoetic awareness, creature consciousness, higher order thought, pure consciousness, self-awareness, and so forth. What Is 'Consciousness'? For Meixner: «Consciousness is a kind of a bipolar medium, of which the one pole (the subject) is referred to the other pole (the object in a general sense) by the relation of —being-conscious-of»

The theory of 'social organization' was a sociological antidote to Sigmund Freud. In that much-quoted segment, Cooley, in 1925, formulated the crucial role of 'primary groups', such as family, playgroups and community of elders, as the source of one's morals, sentiments, and ideals. Primary groups are the first groups of individuals one is introduced to and are also influenced in their ideas and beliefs. In this content, Cooley described the 'looking glass self', which referred on (a) how one imagines one looks to other people, (b) how one imagines the judgment of others based on how one thinks they view them, and (c) how one thinks or feels of how the person views them based on their previous judgments. According this we may suggest that: 'I am not what I think I am, I am not what you think I am, rather, I am what I think you think I am' (Schubert, 2006).

For Mead (1863-1931), existence in community comes before individual consciousness. First one must participate in the different social positions within society and only subsequently can one use that experience to take the perspective of others

and thus become 'conscious'. Mead states that 'the self is a social process'. This process is characterized by Mead as the 'I' and the 'Me'. The 'Me' is the social self and the 'I' is the response to the 'Me'. In other words, the 'I' is the response of an individual to the attitudes of others, while the 'Me' is the organized set of attitudes of others which an individual assumes. In a world of objects, we become aware of ourselves as an object among objects, of our bodies in contradistinction to other bodies. For Whitehead (2001), self-awareness depends on social mirrors, while, what is not public is not conscious. For Mead the thinking process is the internalized dialogue between the 'I' and the 'Me'. Mead develops William James' distinction between the 'I' and the 'Me'. The 'Me' is the accumulated understanding of "the generalized other" i.e. how one thinks one's group perceives oneself etc. The 'I' is the individual's impulses. The 'I' is self as subject; the 'Me' is self as object. The 'I' is the knower, the 'Me' is the known (Schubert, 2006) (Table 2).

Table 2. Transferring the Mead's social theory to the 'Sexual-Self' model

Gender Identity the "Sexual-Me"	Sexuality and Sexual Orientation the "Sexual-I"
'Sexual-Self' as object "Me" is a cognitive object, which is only known retrospectively, that is, on reflection	'Sexual-Self' as subject
the known	the knower
the social self	the response to the 'Me'
the organized set of attitudes of others which an individual assumes	the response of an individual to the attitudes of others

The self that arises in relationship to a specific generalized other is referred to as the "Me." The "Me" is a cognitive object, which is only known retrospectively, that is, on reflection. The responses of the "I" are non-reflective. How the "I" reacts is known only on reflection, that is, after we retrospect. In other words, once the actions of the "I" have become objectified and known, by definition they have become a "Me." Mead emphasize that the "I" is not available to us in our acts, that is, it is only knowable in its objectified form as a "Me." The "Me" follows the "I" so closely in time that it appears as if the "I" is the source of the "running current of awareness." In other words, "Me's" are not static. They are systems that often undergo transformation (George Herbert Mead, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, available in https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mead/

Summarizing, we cannot become self-aware without simultaneously knowing that others are aware. It disposes of the 'other minds' problem: we know that others are aware because we can get inside their skins, through role-modelling. Note that 'Theory of Mind' (reading other people's minds) appears to be the same thing as reflective consciousness (reading your own mind). Extending this aspect, Fransesca Happé (2015) suggested «we may have become conscious as a side-effect of selection pressure to read the minds of others».

Phenomenological aspects of the 'sexual-self'

The phenomenology of human sexuality enables us to recognize the true interdependence of all the factors that go into an individual's sexual make-up. It also provides a trans-disciplinary basis where we can create a synthesis of the various perspectival approaches to the subject. Sexual difference is not just an ontological difference but is also a structure in the foundations of ontology (Heinämaa, 2010). Based primarily on the work of Merleau-Ponty, Suijker et al, (2021) suggested erection dysfunction may have its origins, subjectively speaking, in modifications in sexual projection, the intentional arc, distracting thoughts and finally the body schema (Table 3).

Table 3. Different scientific domains helping to understand the 'Sexual-Self' model's components.

Conceptual and Scientific Domains	Gender Identity or the "Sexual-Me"	Sexuality and Sexual Orientation or the "Sexual-I"
the Self	"Me"	"I"
the Sexual-Self	The sexual-Me	The Sexual-I
Causality	Predisposing – Distal factors	Accelerating – Proximal factors
Phenomenology	Presence	Motility
Physiology	Homeostasis	Reward
Brain topography	Default Mode Network	Reward System
Neurotransmission	Serotonin	Dopamine
Ego- / allo-centric	Allo-centric function	Ego-centric function
Intentionality	About something	Toward something
Conscious level	Mostly non-conscious	Mostly conscious

The 'allo-centric system' (serving here in 'Sexual-Me' function), generates 'judgments of agency' based on generic inferential mechanisms, representing causal models of the world, including the self. It's predictions are also modulated by higher-level priors, including intentionality. On the other hand, the 'ego-centric system' (serving here in 'Sexual-I' function), implements a private mechanism that makes a self-world distinction and gives rise to a 'feeling of agency'. Homeostasis, together with the Default Mode Network, seems to be the domains supporting 'Sexual-Me' stability. On the other hand, 'Sexual-I' is supporting by the 'reward system', which is important for determining motivation-to-action outcomes. The pleasure response is related to the mesolimbic dopaminergic system, which is involved in eating, in the use of psychoactive substances and in sexuality. Finally, we may hypothesize a 'Sexual-Self' system running in parallel with an 'Intentional System', with the 'Sexual-Me' concept corresponding to the 'aboutness', and the 'Sexual-I' concept corresponding to the 'directedness' component of Intentionality (Giotakos O, 2022, 2023).

Summarizing, the fluidity of gender along with sexual fluidity and flexibility indicate that sexual attraction may exist and

vary within a spectrum or a flux changing during the life. On the other hand, scientists distinguished two understandings of the 'self', the self as "Me" and the self as "I". "Me" corresponds to the self as an object of experience, while "I" reflects the self as a subject of experience. The phenomenology of human sexuality provides a trans-disciplinary basis where we can create a synthesis of the various perspectival approaches to the subject. We suggested a 'Sexual-Self' model, comprised from the 'Sexual-Me" component, corresponding to 'Gender Identity', and the 'Sexual-I' component, corresponding to 'Sexuality' - including 'Sexual Preference and Orientation'. We also suggested different scientific concepts and domains that can help understanding the existence and the processes of 'Sexual-Self' throughout the life.

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