The Dance of Privacy: Disclosure of Private Information in Semi-Public Settings

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From a sociological perspective, privacy is not an intrinsic part of our selves, but is a social agreement between us and others. Concealing information from others depends in large part on constructing boundaries around private information and doing what we can to ensure that the boundaries are maintained. Focusing on the social world of sex toy parties—a world where privacy and disclosure are delicately balanced—this research examines how disclosures of private sexual information, which are often regarded as taboo in contemporary American society, are carefully orchestrated and managed. Sex toy parties offer a unique venue to study how individuals navigate the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable levels of disclosure of
sexual information, as sex toy parties involve discussions of sexual practices and products with diverse groups of women, and some disclosure is necessary to create a fun and engaging environment. To better understand how these boundaries are constructed and maintained and how violations of the boundaries are dealt with, I conducted 32 in-depth interviews with sex toy party consultants and observed 20 sex toy parties. Using grounded theory methods and a cognitive sociological approach, I argue that consultants engaged the guests in a complex “dance” of privacy, beginning with the construction of a sex toy party frame that changed the meaning of disclosures from profane to acceptable. This construction often relied upon heteronormative notions of gender; privileged heterosexuality; and involved the manipulation of time and space to create an environment that was conducive to the careful balance of disclosures the consultants desired. Despite this careful orchestration and management, guests were still occasionally “out of frame” with regard to privacy (either by refusing to participate or by over-disclosing). Consultants used a variety of tactics to move these guests back in frame and reinforce the boundaries of the frame without disrupting the party atmosphere and/or damaging their sales. This research adds to our understanding of how frame construction and maintenance occur and how existing cultural frames are selectively appropriated, adapted, and reshaped to give meaning to disclosures of private sexual information and create new frames.

INDEX WORDS: Social construction of privacy, Sex toy parties, Framing, Boundary work, Role strain, Stigma, Emotional labor, Accounts, Aligning actions
THE DANCE OF PRIVACY: DISCLOSURE OF PRIVATE INFORMATION IN SEMI-PUBLIC SETTINGS

by

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to my parents, Rob and Betty Jungels, who were a constant source of encouragement and support during this long journey. Thanks, mom and dad, for everything.
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Though it felt like doing my research and writing my dissertation was sometimes a solitary experience, I was surrounded by supportive friends, family, and colleagues who encouraged me throughout the process and who made the road through graduate school so much more bearable. Because my list of supporters is long, everyone cannot be included here. I want to specifically thank a few people whose support helped me get through the more challenging times.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Sex toy parties might seem like a strange place to study the social construction of privacy, especially if you have never attended one yourself. The first time I attended a sex toy party in 2005, I had just graduated from college and was about to move across the country to begin graduate school. The party was hosted and attended by friends from high school and college, and I was close to most of the people who were there. Even though I was familiar with the products that were demonstrated, it was an entirely new experience for me. Though I had taken sexuality and gender classes in college and considered myself relatively open to discussions of sexuality, this party was one of the first times—outside of a classroom setting—that I felt able to learn about and discuss sex and sexuality with my friends without feeling uncomfortable or embarrassed. In the bustle of beginning graduate school and life in a new city, I did not think about sex toy parties again for a long time; I certainly never thought that in five short years, sex toy parties would occupy a large portion of my thoughts and conversations.

Three years later, after having done an undergraduate and Master’s thesis on the experiences of street prostitutes and the men who hire them, I felt I needed a change of pace. I had spent several months pondering what I might do for my dissertation research—did I want to continue doing research on street prostitution? In early 2008, I attended a lecture by Dr. Michael Reece, of Indiana University, given in my department, and he discussed the work that he was doing for Pure Romance, one of the largest sex toy party companies in the country. He and his research team had been developing a sexual health/sex education course for consultants for Pure Romance, and had conducted quantitative research to learn about the questions that guests ask consultants about sexual health and sexual difficulty. My interest was piqued. As I finished my coursework and qualifying exams, I spent many coffee dates, lunches, and dinners discussing
with friends what, specifically, I might study about sex toy parties. Where, I wondered, was the sociology in sex toys?

In December of 2009, I attended my second sex toy party, through an invitation from a friend from high school. My friend was the consultant, and it was a “couples’ party,” meaning that women would be bringing their male partners to the party. When we arrived, there were three couples in attendance, along with some women who were un-partnered and women whose partners did not attend. All of the women were close friends, but the men were merely acquaintances. Unlike the first party I had attended, I did not participate in this party as a guest; I wanted simply to observe to see if sex toy parties would be a viable avenue of research. In the car on the way to the party, my friend and I discussed how the presence of men (this was her first couples’ party) would likely change how she presented and demonstrated some products. My friend was nervous, she told me, because some of the humor that she used to discuss some products came at the expense of men, and she was unsure about how she would adapt her sales pitch with men attending the party. She needed to be adept at changing her demonstration depending on the group of women who were attending the party, because some guests were uncomfortable viewing the whole array of products that she sold. I saw this adaptability during the course of the party, in particular during the demonstration of a product designed to desensitize the penis so that men last longer during intercourse. She started the demonstration for this product by saying, “Sometimes, men just don’t last long enough,” but stopped in mid-sentence, almost as if she realized that she had started using her standard sales pitch. Rather than continue down that road (which relied on the notion that men do not satisfy their partners unless they last a certain amount of time), she changed her demonstration to say that this product could help slow men down. The presence of men meant that she could not use them as a source of
humor and bonding for the women in attendance, and she had to be cautious about offending any
of the guests. In the car on the way home, she told me that she was initially worried that she
might have alienated some of the men by demonstrating this product, but in fact one of the men
and his girlfriend ended up placing an order for the desensitizing cream.

This party was enlightening for me for a number of reasons. First, I had not fully
considered the role of the consultant in leading the guests toward discussions of sexuality. Based
on my limited experience with sex toy parties, I had assumed that few people would attend a sex
toy party unless they knew about the products being demonstrated and were comfortable
discussing sex in a semi-private group setting. Obviously, this assumption was incorrect. Second,
it was at this party that I realized that consultants probably dealt with uncomfortable or
recalcitrant guests on a regular basis, and that it likely took a strong presentation of self and
subtle social cues on the consultants’ part to create a financially successful, educational, fun, and
intimate environment for attendees.

In May 2010, I attended my third sex toy party. Another graduate student who knew that
I was interested in sex toy parties invited me to attend the party (hosted by a female friend of her
boyfriend). There were four guests at this party. I only knew my colleague and she only knew the
hostess, though they were not close friends either. This party was revelatory for me. There I was,
in the living room of a complete stranger, with a colleague from graduate school (whom I was
not very close with at the time—more acquaintances than friends), smelling perfumes, tasting
lubricants, passing around sex toys, while having frank discussions about sexuality, sexual
practices, and the benefits of specific products. The consultant was relatively new to the
business, and I was amazed at the level of disclosure she engaged in at the party. At the first
party I attended in 2005, the consultant had clearly been nervous and perhaps a bit
uncomfortable; this consultant, on the other hand, had no such qualms. The consultant at this party disclosed some information about her (and her partner’s) personal preferences for and experiences with certain products, and she seemed to have few reservations about sharing her experiences with us (though not all of the products were discussed in a universally positive light).

These final two parties—only separated by a few months, in late 2009 and early 2010—offered me a whole new outlook on sex toy parties. It was at these parties that I fully began to recognize the importance the role of the consultant in developing an environment conducive to discussing sexuality and sexuality-related products. At the third party, my research questions began to crystallize. Unlike the first party I had participated in (which was attended by my close friends, most of whom I had known for over a decade), at this party I only knew one person—and I did not really know her very well at all. How was it that we were able to discuss sexuality so openly, even with complete strangers? As sociology graduate students studying and teaching about sex, sexuality, and gender, I thought that my colleague and I might be more comfortable than the average American discussing sexuality openly. But given that most American women do not have the experience discussing and studying sexuality that my colleague and I had, and the dominant ideology about sexuality in the United States (that it is private and should not be discussed with those to whom we are not socially close), how had sex toy parties become so popular and successful? How were consultants able to convince women to discuss sexuality so openly, despite the socialization that most guests would have received about the stigmatized nature of discussions of sexuality?
RESEARCH AIMS

The three parties that I participated in and observed before beginning my research illustrate the diversity of experiences that can occur at sex toy parties. At the first party, all of the guests were close friends and had established relationships; at the second, several of the people were merely acquaintances; at the third, we were virtually strangers. How were consultants able to construct a fun and comfortable environment among such diverse groups of people, discuss topics that most people regard as deeply personal, while establishing the rules of disclosure? The consultants clearly wanted some disclosure and interaction with their guests; if no one was willing to discuss their experiences with the products or if guests were too embarrassed to test the products during the demonstration, it would be a pretty dull experience. How were consultants able to overcome the dominant socialization regarding privacy and sex in the few short hours they had with guests and encourage them to disclose some private sexual information during the party? The consultants, as I conceptualized them, were leading the guests at the party in a complicated “dance of privacy,” teaching the guests the rules (or “steps”) of disclosure in constantly changing social environments. How, I wondered, did they do this? How did they manage situations in which guests refused to learn the dance, and how did consultants and guests recover from situations in which they violated the boundaries of private/public information? These are the questions my research aims to answer.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS RESEARCH

Given the cultural norm that discussions of sex and sexuality are stigmatized, sex toy parties offer a unique research site with which to examine disclosures of information that most people regard as extremely private. Sex toy parties are becoming quite common: Pure Romance, one of the largest sex toy party companies in the country, has more than 75,000 consultants
nationwide and more than 2 million customers. It sells more than 3 million products per year; advertises on daytime television; and has been profiled by major news outlets (Alexander 2006a; Alexander 2006b; Cicchinelli 2011; Pure Romance.com 2012). Sex toy parties represent an important venue for education and entertainment for women, especially given the lack of accessible and reliable sex education for adult women (Herbenick, Reece, and Hollub 2009; Luker 2006; Pappas 2011). If consultants are successful in their attempts to educate women and to get guests to re-examine or re-shape their understanding of sex as a stigmatized topic, sex toy party consultants have the potential to be a significant force in challenging the cultural taboo against discussions of sexuality. An important part of this re-examination of cultural taboos is the dance of privacy that consultants undergo with guests. How consultants teach diverse groups of guests the dance and how they correct missteps can be translated to our own day-to-day negotiations of privacy with our colleagues, family members, friends, and neighbors.

Though we often take for granted that we are entitled to privacy—to protect our information from others who would try to breech the privacy boundaries that we regard as inviolate—privacy is anything but natural. As Nippert-Eng argued (2010), privacy is a complicated social agreement involving power in relationships, our sense of self as members of a social group, and social norms. What we regard as private, what private information we choose to disclose and under what circumstances, and how we deal with violations of our privacy are intrinsically linked to our cultural socialization and the social groups to which we belong. Most of us engage in the dance of privacy on a regular basis, and most of the people we interact with are willing to dance along. When we lower our voice to answer a sensitive phone call and others pretend they can no longer hear us, or when we close our bedroom and bathroom doors and others knock before entering, we are engaging others in the dance of privacy. These actions are
not merely social niceties; they create and reinforce a symbolic boundary between us and others, marking a space or a time or a conversation as private.

Using a cognitive sociological approach allows us to examine the placement, construction, and maintenance of these boundaries. Cognitive sociologists (see Dalmage 2000; Nippert-Eng 2010; Zerubavel 1991) have argued that the boundary-patrolling mechanisms we use to protect our privacy are not natural; instead, they have to be taught to us by members of our social groups (often with repeated failures, as anyone who has spent time with curious young children knows). When these boundaries are violated—whether because someone has crossed into an area we thought had been clearly marked private, or because someone reveals information that we would prefer not to know—the sense of violation can be quite damaging to our sense of self in relation to others. In addition, using a cognitive sociological approach can help us better understand why some topics (especially those related to sexual matters) are deemed inappropriate to discuss in some contexts (e.g., at a dinner party), but are acceptable in other contexts (e.g., the doctor’s office).

As a graduate student instructor who taught undergraduate sexuality courses, the dance that sex toy party consultants did was quite like the one I engaged in every semester with new cohorts of students. While I wanted my students to personalize and internalize the information that we discussed in class and that I lectured about, I was also cautious about managing their disclosures in the classroom. In addition, I was careful about disclosing personal information to my students and was wary of their personal questions. On the whole, I thought I was quite skilled at doing this dance with my students. One of the challenges of an undergraduate sexuality course is to get the students to think academically and sociologically about sex, rather than only from their own personal experience or from the dominant cultural perspective. I want them to
understand that their lives—even parts of their lives as intimate and private as sex—are a complex “intersection of biography and history,” as Mills (1959) stated, and I believe that in order to do this, I have to control the amount of disclosures that students and I make in class. One instance at the beginning of a semester a few years ago illustrated how important frames are to our understanding of disclosures and privacy and how, despite my best efforts, I sometimes have failed at the dance of privacy with my students.

At the end of the first day of class, I always request that students ask me three questions—about the syllabus, my research, the course—before I dismiss them. I am accustomed to questions about my dissertation and about my personal life (“Are you married?” “Do you have kids?”), but during this class a student asked “Are you a virgin?” I was a bit taken aback! I did not feel that it was appropriate for me to rebuke the student for her question—I had not said personal questions were out of bounds, and I did not want to embarrass her and alienate other students. I answered her by saying that I thought the reason she asked that question was because in our culture we perceive that expertise comes from practice and personal experience, rather than through study. In other words, I asked, do you think it might be inappropriate for a virgin to teach a sexuality class? This class, I told the students, would not be about my sex life, nor would it be about theirs; instead, it would be about the social construction of sex and the notion of sex as a cultural institution, not about personal experience.

This situation illustrated to me the importance not only of the dance of privacy—and my failure at initiating the dance to my satisfaction—but also of the way discussions of sexuality are framed in our society. For this student, it was illogical for someone who had never had sex to teach a sexuality class, so she wanted me to offer my bona fides before she took my status as the instructor seriously. This situation demonstrated to me, too, that discussions of sexuality in
contemporary American society are often framed as being either completely abstract (e.g., at the doctor’s office) or extremely concrete and explicit. This student’s question helped me to understand the nature of these two existing frames, and the complex work that must be undertaken when we want to try to implement a new frame.

Sex toy party consultants create new frames with their guests, and although they are not academic and educational in the same way as is the frame I construct with my students, it is nevertheless a new frame. Unlike sex toy party consultants, who had but a few hours on a single occasion to establish these unspoken rules with guests, I had the benefits of 15 weeks to guide my students through the dance and the cultural weight that the role of “teacher” carries in determining the classroom environment. My student’s question demonstrated to me the difficulty in establishing a new frame, even with those benefits. Even without these benefits, though, sex toy party consultants were able to construct and maintain a new frame successfully night after night, with diverse and changing groups of women. How were they able to do this and preserve their presentation of self and that of their guests along the way, especially when presented with situations that might damage their presentation of self (like my student’s question)? Again, this research seeks to answer these questions, and also develop a better understanding of how frames are constructed and maintained, and how people deal with violations of the frame’s boundaries.

OVERVIEW

In Chapter Two, I outline the history of sex toy parties. Specifically, I discuss their foundation in traveling sales companies, their relationship to other types of at-home sales companies, and their dramatic growth and development over the past few decades. In addition, Chapter Two contains the theoretical approaches that guided this research. Chapter Three covers my research methodology, including sampling and data analysis procedures.
Over the two years that I conducted this research, I heard hilarious, thoughtful, and shocking stories about how consultants tried and occasionally failed to build boundaries around information that was deemed private and information that was acceptable to disclose. These stories comprise Chapters Four, Five, Six, and Seven. Chapter Four introduces the idea that there are culturally bound frames in which discussions of sexuality are generally deemed appropriate—the medical/informational frame and the pornographic frame—and demonstrates that consultants are able to construct what may be called a sex toy party frame (with its own distinct boundaries and maintenance techniques) by adopting elements from each of the existing frames. In Chapter Five, I examine the sex toy party frame in more detail, including how consultants attempted to bond the guests together by emphasizing their shared experiences as women while simultaneously separating their experiences from those of men. In addition, Chapter Five includes a discussion of how consultants manipulate time and space in order to create an environment where discussions of sex are comfortable and can be successfully managed by the consultant. Chapters Six and Seven deal specifically with violations of the sex toy party frame. Chapter Six examines situations in which there were guests who were uncomfortable or who were reluctant to discuss private information at the party, and how the consultants attempted to manage those situations. Chapter Seven discusses the other extreme: guests who disclosed too much information and threatened the boundaries of the sex toy party frame. In addition, I examine the ways in which guests and consultants work together to reinforce the boundaries of the frame. Finally, in Chapter Eight I discuss the sociological importance and relevance of my research, limitations of this study, and directions for further research.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Although some research exists about how and why individuals reveal private and potentially stigmatizing information in intimate relationships, very little research exists concerning how individuals decide to reveal private information in semi-public settings or in social groups with people who are not well-known. Understanding how individuals decide to disclose private information (e.g., what relevant factors indicate disclosure is advantageous; how are inappropriate disclosures managed and remembered) is important to understanding the meaning of these disclosures to individuals. Indeed, the disclosure or concealment of private information may be an important part of the development of self and impression management. Simmel (1906) argued that all social relationships contain some amount of secrecy, but sociologists have only recently begun to examine how secrecy helps individuals to create and maintain relationships, and how the disclosure of secret information may help or hinder an individual’s presentation of self (see Nippert-Eng 2011).

Individuals have become more and more concerned about the disclosure of their private information as the information age causes encroachments on what is perceived to be private. Individuals increasingly express concern about how private information is obtained and disseminated, especially as it seems that more and more of our “personal” information is gathered without our knowledge or consent (Fairfield 2005). News stories about private information being stolen, sold, discarded, or made public are increasing. Due to these situations, individuals (and, increasingly, legislators) are concerned about potentially damaging information being gathered and revealed without an individual’s consent. Little attention has been paid to situations in which individuals choose to reveal private information about themselves, how these situations are created and managed, and what effect disclosure has on group unity.
Sex toy parties offer a unique social situation in which information that is generally regarded as “private” is discussed openly. Consultants go to great lengths to create a sense of bonding among guests, and sexuality (including products related to sex, sexual positions, sexual health issues, and sexual difficulties) is discussed both in “semi-public” and “private” areas of the parties. Previous research indicates that sex toy party consultants are used as a resource of sexual knowledge for attendees at parties. Consultants are frequently asked questions about how to increase sexual arousal, toy selection, and sexual health matters (i.e., lubrication, orgasm, etc.), and they may act as nurses, sex educators and/or relationship counselors (Herbenick and Reece 2009; Herbenick, Reece and Hollub 2009). Generally, it has been acknowledged that the social environment created by the sex toy party is conducive to disclosure of private information. Not much attention, however, has been given to the social meanings that these disclosures have for individuals. Similarly, no research exists concerning how consultants themselves disclose personal information and how they respond to disclosures of personal information.

The focus of this dissertation is on the social context and social construction of disclosures of private sexual information. While the content of the information is important, what is often overlooked is the social context in which disclosures happen. When disclosures are deemed to be appropriate or inappropriate, how individuals learn and use social rules about disclosures, what significance these disclosures have for members of the group, and how disclosures of private information impact impression management are critically important to consultants. Situations in which too much information is revealed about the self or about others and how individuals learn what level of sharing is appropriate and how to respond when “over-sharing” happens are of particular interest. Little sociological research addresses these issues (see
Nippert-Eng [2010] for a brief discussion of these issues), and this research seeks to broaden and extend existing sociological theory on privacy to include issues of over- and under-sharing.

Many situations offer individuals the opportunity to reveal private information, but sex toy parties offer a unique venue to investigate the meanings of disclosures. Sex toy parties are almost exclusively attended and facilitated by women, and the guests attending parties may be close intimates, immediate family members, professional colleagues, or strangers. Products sold might include sex toys, lubricants, lingerie, and sexual aids, which are often tried on, tested, and tasted by participants who openly discuss the attributes of the products with the consultant and other guests in a group setting. In some cases, guests and the consultant may reveal the effectiveness or usefulness of products from their own personal experience, and frank discussions of sexuality, sexual practices, and attitudes about sex occur. In these social settings, individuals (especially the consultants) are subjected to a measure of social pressure to reveal private information in order to engender a sense of bonding. Participants must also be aware of the boundaries of disclosure; that is, they must avoid revealing stigmatizing information, or revealing too much information that could damage the party atmosphere. Sex toy parties thus create a unique social environment where some personal disclosure is necessary to create an engaging atmosphere, but too much disclosure or poorly timed disclosure may result in damage to the social environment or one’s presentation of self. Because the purchase of products is usually done in a private room away from other guests, guests often reveal more intimate sexual information or problems to the consultant. Because the guests’ relationship to the consultant may be as distant as someone they just met or as close as an immediate family member, these disclosures can also involve a complex balancing act between over- and under-disclosure.
Nippert-Eng (2010:263) outlined what she called “the dance of privacy” that people regularly engage in (e.g., with neighbors). Because our relationships with neighbors can be highly variable—as close as family or as distant as newcomers to the neighborhood—our disclosures to them can be fraught with tension about what to disclose and what to conceal. Disclosing too much (or not enough) can cause serious problems in a neighbor-relationship and can affect the entire neighborhood. The dance is about revealing and concealing without upsetting others, but also about exerting one’s own desires about where the boundaries should be without offending anyone. Avoidance techniques (closing blinds, avoiding eye contact, etc.) are important techniques that neighbors use to create different boundaries with different individuals at different times. This dance exists, too, at sex toy parties. Because attendees have great variability in terms of their social distance from each other, they must constantly negotiate the boundaries between sharing too little and too much.

Tied in with this “dance” is the concept of “private,” “public,” and “parochial” space. Nippert-Eng (2010) proposed that there are three levels of interactions—the private (family and household), the parochial (the neighborhood, workplace, etc.), and the public (a street filled with strangers)—and that these three zones require different behavior and different public/private boundaries to be drawn. Nippert-Eng (2010:269) argued that these three areas often exist simultaneously (e.g., on a neighborhood street; one might encounter a stranger, an acquaintance, and a family member at the same time). The challenge, then, is not to “figure out ‘what kind of space is this?’ . . . instead, it is to develop the ability to quickly sort out everyone encountered according to the relationship one has with them.” Clearly these challenges are present for consultants and attendees of sex toy parties—it is not as much about the “space” the party is occurring in (especially for the consultant, who is likely in a space she’s never been before), but
about determining the relationship one has with others in the space and the relationship the individuals have to one another.

Nippert-Eng proposed that privacy violations can occur in a myriad of ways, but that all violations of privacy “result from a framing mismatch” between how public or private an individual believes the information is and other ways of defining the situation (2010:289). Of particular interest for this research are “framing mismatches” that occur when we have “uncontrolled knowledge of others” or when “we feel forced to observe others” (Nippert-Eng 2010:229). Nippert-Eng only briefly discussed these types of violations, but my own research indicates that these types of privacy violations—wherein one person shares too much information—can be quite common at sex toy parties. The elaborate dance that consultants and consultants engage in during a sex toy party can be easily disrupted or destroyed with one false move—and, for most of the people attending the party, it is a dance they have not learned and have not rehearsed. Even consultants, who arguably “know the steps,” are always dancing with a new set of partners and must renegotiate each party environment.

This “dance of privacy” was the primary focus of this research. How individuals negotiated the boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate levels of disclosure and how individuals protect their own privacy and the privacies of others were of key importance. Also critical to this “dance” is how individuals learn the steps. The general socialization that Americans receive about sexuality (that it is private, secret, and perhaps shameful) presents a counterpoint to sex toy parties, where sexuality is addressed openly, frankly, and often with humor. Consultants clearly undergo a distinct “re-socialization” in their training to become sex-toy party consultants, and they are able to re-socialize their audience very quickly and effectively—essentially, teaching them the “steps.”
Ecks (2001) argued that frames help us to understand a variety of different situations and cultural objects, and the frames that we use imbue the situations and objects with meaning(s). The problem, according to Ecks, is when we are confronted with ambiguous situations and objects (i.e., images of the female nude in a “commercial” frame rather than artistic, informational, or pornographic frame). Similarly, discussions of private sexual information are often culturally understood to occur within a limited number of frames; for example, within a medical frame (the doctor’s or therapist’s office), the educational frame (sex education), the pornographic frame, or an intimate frame (i.e., with closest friends/family, or sex partners). The challenge for consultants is to create a sex toy party frame that often incorporates elements from these pre-existing frames, but is distinct from each of them.

When we are confronted with a situation or an object that does not fit our pre-existing frameworks, we must reframe the situation or object, either by creating a new frame, or by fitting the situation or object into a frame that is already within our “cultural tool kit” (Ecks 2001:610). Consultants must also be able to help attendees “get back ‘in frame’” if a violation occurs (Nippert-Eng 2010:269; see also Ecks 2001;). Nippert-Eng proposed that “re-framing” occurs in one of three ways: adjusting how private something really is; adjusting our behavior to prevent future violations; or forcing others to adjust their behavior. Any and all of these techniques are applicable at a sex toy party. Consultants must be acutely aware of framing conflicts throughout the course of the party; they must walk a fine line between appropriate and inappropriate disclosure; they must encourage the attendees to learn the correct frame and to “dance the dance,” all while they sell their product line and keep the guests entertained.

As outlined by Eviatar Zerubavel, cognitive sociology allows for a unique perspective on the social world. Zerubavel argued that “[b]ecoming social implies learning not only how to act
but how to think in a social manner” (1997:15). Cognitive sociology is a theoretical middle-ground between cognitive universalism (which focuses on the universal foundations of human thought) and cognitive individualism (which presents human thoughts as highly individualized and idiosyncratic). Cognitive sociology, then, can help us understand how we construct meanings of our social world through perceiving, attending, classifying, signifying, timing, and remembering (Zerubavel 1997; see also Brekhus 2007). Private information and the “dance” or “framing” of privacy fits this model of how we think in a social manner. While what we choose to disclose and reveal may be viewed as an individual decision, it is informed by both our group membership and our socialization as members of a particular culture.

THE ORIGINS OF AT-HOME SEX TOY PARTIES

At-home sex toy parties find their origins in Tupperware and other direct-sales techniques. Until the 1950s, at-home marketing schemes were largely the domain of men, who traveled door-to-door selling a variety of household products. Clarke (1999) noted that the general public often regarded door-to-door salesmen as unscrupulous predators who used hard-selling techniques to take advantage of housewives, so much so that legislation was passed to prevent them from selling their products unsolicited. Conducting sales parties in the home was a convenient way to circumvent these laws by requiring an invitation; using women as sales agents allowed companies to exploit the perception of the housewife as both trustworthy and knowledgeable. In addition, employing women rather than men as sales agents allowed them access to social networks that would be inaccessible to men. At-home sales parties developed as a sales technique to introduce a new product to a skeptical and budget-conscious public, especially to housewives isolated in rural and suburban areas (Clarke 1999).
At-home sales parties were originally implemented by the Stanley Home Products company, which recognized the role of housewife as an important, powerful, and knowledgeable consumer of home products. At-home sales parties allowed women to get together under the pretense of improving their domestic life while simultaneously escaping from it (Clarke 1999). Although the origins of at-home sales parties appear with their use by Stanley Home Products, Tupperware greatly expanded its notoriety and popularity. Tupperware parties (which sold a now-commonplace form of kitchen and cookware) relied on interactive displays and demonstrations of the product line and on breaking down the inhibitions of attendees through games; they also relied on the concept of reciprocity, as attendees repaid the hostess’ hospitality by hosting their own event, which ensured the growth of the dealer’s sales network (Clarke 1999). In addition, successful saleswomen were rewarded with gifts and awards from the company, fostering a sense of reciprocity and obligation to the company (and competition and rivalry between different units of the company) (Storr 2003).

Some sociological and economic research indicates that while there are a variety of reasons an individual would become involved in a direct sales company, many women cite the “convenience” of the employment: they can set their own hours, work at their own pace, structure their business so they are able to meet home and family obligations, and receive recognition that they lack in other areas of their lives (Mullaney and Shope 2012). The flexibility that direct sales companies offer is positioned as being directly opposed to the inflexible (and often unrewarding) “corporate world.” Mary Kay Cosmetics, for example, explicitly markets its company as one that is structured on “flex-time” and is well suited to mothers with children of all ages (Connelly and Rhoton 1988; Mullaney and Shope 2012). Despite the long history of direct sales in the United States, there are a variety of stigmas still associated with this type of
work. As Mullaney and Shope (2012) discussed, the belief that saleswomen are pushy, bored housewives must be overcome—in the consultant’s mind, as well as in her customer’s—and many Americans still question whether direct sales is “real work.” To counter these stereotypes, direct sales is often reframed (by companies and by the consultants themselves) as an “altruistic endeavor” in which the sales process is transformed from “something you do to someone [to something done] for someone” (Mullaney and Shope 2012:42).

Direct sales companies also emphasize the “fun” of being a consultant and the opportunity to socialize with other adults, “especially in a climate where it is also taboo to admit that time spent at home with children can eventually wear away at women” (Mullaney and Shope 2012:83). As Mullaney and Shope (2012:109) pointed out in their study of direct sales, the notion of work and fun are so opposed in contemporary American culture that direct sales companies both challenge and transform the idea of work into fun by emphasizing the fun that consultants have and that they are “paid to party.” Fun does not create itself, though, and consultants must serve as “emotional and temporal tour guides” for guests, all while presenting a fun and lively presentation of self. Consultants must engage in strenuous emotion work throughout the party and sales process to encourage the fun environment that is desired; in addition, they must deal with challenges to the products that they sell, the business model, and the value of their jobs as “work.” Much of the success of direct sales is also due to social norms about behavior in social settings. Consultants rely on guests to behave according to those norms, including politeness, tact, and being good mannered.

At-home party consultants occupy a unique position in the sales chain between retailer and customer; indeed, they are both retailer and customer (Storr 2003). They are responsible for paying for their own “sales kit” (including any items that they wish to demonstrate or display,
which are usually bought at cost from the company), materials for games (including prizes), sales booklets, and business expenses (transportation/travel expenses, marketing, etc.). Consultants are essentially “purchasing” the products from the larger company on behalf of their party guests, so they also act as distributors (Storr 2003). Consultants work entirely on commission, part of which is shared with the hostess in the form of credit toward her own order. Profits can be negligible after operational and business costs are accounted for (Prus and Frisby 1990; Storr 2003). Although each individual party may account for two to three hours of a consultant’s time, considerably more time is spent planning for parties, preparing hostesses, placing orders (for customers and for their kits), attending company meetings, and calculating sales (Storr 2003). Although profits can be considerable (especially if a saleswoman has several recruits who work under her), for most consultants the profits from their businesses are small (Storr 2000; Storr 2003). Indeed, almost all of Connelly and Rhoton’s (1988) respondents (women who sold Mary Kay or Amway products) made very little income or lost money from their direct sales business.

Most at-home parties are considered a “multilevel marketing organization” in which saleswomen are responsible for recruiting three different sets of people: guests, hostesses, and dealers. Saleswomen (often called “consultants,” “dealers,” “presenters,” or “consultants”) recruit hostesses to have a party, who in turn recruit guests to attend the party (Connelly and Rhoton 1988). Hostesses receive a percentage of the proceeds of the party (determined by the number of guests, the volume of sales, and the number of “re-bookings” that take place at the party). Although at-home sales parties are often viewed as a social occasion for guests, it is one with “strings attached” because they are recruited through a sense of personal obligation to the hostess (Prus and Frisby 1990). At the beginning of a consultant’s career, she will largely be recruiting hostesses from within her own social network; Taylor (1978) estimated that presenters
know 77 percent of the guests at their first party. As the number of bookings increases, the saleswoman will likely go outside of her own social circle and eventually present her product at a party in which she knows very few, if any, of the guests (Taylor 1978). One of the primary ways that presenters find hostesses is through “re-bookings,” or recruiting a new hostess from the guests assembled at a party. Encouraging “re-booking” among her guests can often increase the size of the hostess’ prize at the end of the party; the sense of reciprocity and obligation that guests feel toward their hostess extends from simply attending the party to agreeing to host one of their own (Prus and Frisby 1990; Storr 2003; Taylor 1978). The success of a particular saleswoman is focused around her ability to continue to recruit new hostesses and expand her sales network; the inability to recruit new hostesses is the primary reason that consultants become inactive in their party-plan businesses (Storr 2003). Finally, saleswomen are responsible for recruiting new dealers. When a saleswoman recruits a new saleswoman, she receives a portion of the new agent’s commission; for many companies, this is the only way to move up in the company hierarchy and earn significantly more than if one remained in sales alone (Prus and Frisby 1990; Storr 2003). Prizes, awards, and gifts are given to dealers for successful sales and for the ability to recruit new dealers; for example, a pink Cadillac is given as an award for those Mary Kay cosmetics dealers who have large and successful sales networks.

Today, there are hundreds of companies that use at-home sales techniques, selling a wide variety of products including kitchenware, food items, cleaning products, pet products, perfume and spa products, cosmetics, children’s toys, clothing, home and garden supplies, jewelry, lingerie, and sex toys. There are dozens of sex-toy party companies across the country, and they are extremely lucrative: Passion Parties has “3,300 saleswomen and sales have reached $20 million dollars annually,” and Pure Romance claims to have 40,000 active consultants in the
United States (Navarro 2004). Given the popularity and success of sex toy parties, they present a unique perspective on changing norms and values—both sexual norms and values, and those regarding privacy and private information.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Sociologists have long argued that secrecy and privacy are essential elements of all social relationships (Simmel 1906). According to Schwartz (1968), the ability to withdraw from others is essential to being able to maintain relationships with others; indeed, Schwartz argued that if all “sins, crimes and errors” that occurred were exposed, it would be hard to maintain stability and order in the social group, especially as emotional involvement with another increases (1968:744). Secrecy is important to the development of the individual self, and “people identify more with the characteristics they hide than with the ones they publicly tout . . . especially their secret weaknesses” (Richardson 1988:213). Individuals try to conceal information about themselves that they fear others would use against them or would discredit their public persona. Sociologists have connected privacy and/or withdrawal into a private sphere with Goffman’s (1959) concepts of “front stage” and “back stage”—keeping shameful or damaging information in the “back stage” allows us to present a more cohesive and acceptable “self” when we are performing on the front stage. It is this hidden information that we closely associate with our “real selves.” As we become more intimate with others, we slowly reveal this hidden information to our intimate relations, allowing others to see us as we really are (Davis 1973). What is considered “discreditable” information (information we would try to keep private) changes over time, space, social group, and culture; it can also change with legislation, as when prohibition made alcohol consumption illegal or when states legalize the sale of items that were previously considered shameful or damaging (e.g., marijuana, sex toys, or sexual services). Understanding how these
shifts occur, how social groups influence our decisions about what is “private” and what is available for public consumption, and how boundaries between private/public and disclosure/concealment are constructed are important factors when investigating social dynamics.

Social relationships, Simmel (1906) argued, are always marked by some secrecy, as we are usually unable (and unwilling) to share every piece of information with others. In all social situations, then, we choose what to reveal about ourselves, and others must judge us based on what pieces we choose to reveal. But, as Richardson noted (1988), the dialectical relationship between revealing and concealing is a contentious one. While we want to reveal information and be seen as our “true selves,” we are aware of the damage that we can incur if we reveal too much (or not enough). As we interact, though, we are often aware that others are hiding certain information from us. Glaser and Strauss argued that in all social situations a participant “cannot always be certain—even when given seemingly trustworthy guarantees—that he [or she] knows the other’s identity or his [or her] own identity in the eyes of the other” (1964:669). Glaser and Strauss outlined four “awareness contexts” that hinge on the awareness each participant has of (a) the other’s identity (whether they are being truthful about their identity or if they are concealing information), and (b) the other’s perception of their presented identity. The “closed awareness” context occurs when neither participant knows of the other’s identity or perception of their own identity; “open awareness” contexts are created when both participants are aware of identities and perceptions; “suspicion awareness” contexts occurs when one participant knows more than the other; “pretense awareness” happens when “both participants are fully aware, but pretend not to be” (Glaser and Strauss 1964:670). Glaser and Strauss explicitly addressed Goffman’s presentation of self, and maintained that Goffman’s work dealt largely with closed
and pretense awareness contexts: situations in which neither participant is fully aware of the identity of the other, and situations in which both participants are fully aware but act as if they are not.

Individuals concealing information from one another can clearly lead to closed awareness contexts. Pretense awareness can occur when we learn something about others that we would prefer not to know, and all parties pretend not to have disclosed or received the information. Pretense awareness can also occur through “gossip or confession” or when individuals reveal their secret information “not only in spite of efforts not to do so, but often for the very reason that they anxiously attempt to guard themselves” (Simmel 1906:456). In addition, we grant people discretion by intentionally not attempting to learn their secrets or private information. Hence, all social relationships are a give and take between revealing, concealing, seeking information, and being discrete. In this context, then, sex toy party consultants face a fine balancing act between suspicion, pretense, and open awareness contexts. They must grant discretion, seek information, keep their own secrets (or disclose them) in order to create a sales-friendly and intimate environment, all while attempting to maintain an acceptable presentation of self in an environment that, while familiar to them, may be uncomfortable or foreign for their clients.

Violations of Privacy

Closely connected to the concepts of awareness contexts is Nippert-Eng’s analysis of “privacy framing” (2010). Nippert-Eng argues that “all privacy violations result from a framing mismatch. . . a function of goodness of fit” between how public/private an individual believes information is and other ways of defining the situation (2010:289). While the obvious example of privacy violations occurs when we are unable to control who has access to information about
ourselves, violations can also happen when we have “uncontrolled knowledge of others” or when we “feel forced to observe others” and subsequently feel that our privacy has been violated (Nippert-Eng 2010:229). This may result in either suspicion contexts (i.e., one person over-shares, but the listeners do not reveal that they believe too much information was revealed) or pretense contexts (i.e., one person over-shares, and both the discloser and the listeners pretend it never happened). There may be additional awareness contexts (e.g., when an individual believes he or she has shared too much, but the reaction of the listeners indicates otherwise).

Framing mismatches and conflicts also can influence how we experience privacy violations. First, individuals will experience a greater impact if their definition of the situation is significantly different from the other people’s definition of the situation; the greater “out of frame” we are, the greater the impact will be. Second, the greater the gap between the reality of the situation and our framing of it, the more negative consequences are likely. Hand in hand with serious negative consequences are efforts to repair the damage: the more time consuming and expensive our response to the violation is, the more impact the violation has. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the symbolic consequences of the violation can increase the impact we feel, in particular if the violation forces us to “re-envision our sense of self relative to others and our relationships we have with them” (Nippert-Eng 2010:293). Having a strong reaction to a violation, Nippert-Eng (2010) argued, indicates that the situation was crucial to our definition and understanding of our sense of self. Situations in which privacy violations result in feelings of denigration or feeling “less than” the violator are particularly emotional because these force us to re-assess our sense of self and our relationships with others. In addition, our emotions are often heightened in these situations because our sense of self does not exist solely in the present. Violations of our privacy impact how we thought of ourselves in the past and how we will think
of ourselves in the future. These serious violations not only impact our sense of self—past, present, and future—but also underscore how little control we have over our lives.

Privacy violations reveal that we take a lot of things about privacy for granted (Nippert-Eng 2010). First, violations force us to acknowledge that privacy only exists if others grant it to us. Privacy violations can be particularly disturbing if we are accustomed to being in situations where we are granted a lot of privacy. Second, privacy is a measure of status, and violations of our privacy indicate a loss of status or evidence that the status we believe we hold is not acknowledged by others. Sex toy party consultants must navigate fine boundaries between violating their own and others’ privacy, boundaries that are fraught with psychological and social consequences.

Privacy and Impression Management

Goffman (1959) argued that our production of self is the result of interaction between the self we perform in front of others and their reactions to our performances. Impression management requires that individuals act in a specific manner to produce an expected result in their audience, primarily through presenting a “self” that is strong and cohesive enough to induce such action. Actors and audiences are often in a closed awareness context: neither knows the true identity of the other, and both are often unaware of how the other perceives the actions of the other (i.e., whether or not the presentation of self is successful) (Glaser and Strauss 1964). Actors are constantly trying to control the perception the audience has of them and how the audience members responds to them. Goffman argued that actors must be guarded against disruptions in their performances if a cohesive and ideal presentation of self is to occur. These incidents can damage or derail the performances actors intended, and result in undesirable responses from the audience. These damaging or derailing moments can result in a change in
awareness contexts—from closed in which neither participant knows the true identity of the other (or the other’s perception of him/her) to a pretense awareness context, in which both participants are fully aware of identities and perceptions, but pretend not to be. Hence, individuals engage in “preventative practices” that help to prevent these damaging incidents before they happen. Because these performances occur through a two-level process—the individual and the audience—preventative measures are taken by both groups. Indeed, Goffman pointed out that “few impressions could survive if those who received the impression did not exert tact in their reception of it” (1959:14). It seems as if both audience and actors work in collusion to maintain a mostly-closed awareness context to prevent embarrassment for all participants.

Goffman argued that every performance includes a front and back stage. The front stage is where the performance occurs. It can include the setting (existing props and scenery), which is generally inflexible, and the “personal front” (props we bring with us to help make our performance more cohesive and encompassing, including our appearance, mannerisms, body language, etc.). The back stage, on the other hand, is the area in which we prepare for our performances. This area is generally unavailable for the audience to see and interact with. Individuals go to great lengths to prevent their audience from seeing the backstage preparations, just as they try to prevent the audience from seeing actions that are discrediting or that would run counter to the idealized performance being displayed (e.g., the “mistakes” and “slips” that might lead the audience to become aware of disparities in the presentation of self). Performers hide a variety of things from their audience, including “secret pleasures,” errors and corrections to errors, evidence of “dirty work” or the process that went into producing the performance, and any “indignities, insults, [and] humiliations” that were suffered to acquire the role and put on the
performance (Goffman, 1959). Actors will try and hide any education they have had to enact an ideal performance, giving the impression that they have always had the knowledge or skills required to enact the performance (Goffman, 1959). All of these preventative measures require, to some degree, audience participation and the audience’s ability and desire to ignore minor slips and mistakes (Ritzer 2004).

**Damaged Presentations and Stigma**

One of the most important ways actors can prevent damage to their performances is “dramaturgical discipline” (Goffman 1959:217). Actors must appear to the audience to be fully engrossed in the performance, but actors must not get “carried away” by the performance, because they need to be engaged with the reciprocal nature of the performance; that is, they have to be aware of the performance and of the fact that they are actively performing (Goffman 1959). A major part of dramaturgical discipline is maintaining self-control and self-awareness. Being aware of body language, facial expressions and tone of voice, Goffman notes, is “the crucial test of one’s ability as a performer” (1959:217). Dramaturgical circumspection, another preventative method, involves planning the performance in advance, anticipating and planning for emergencies that might occur during the performance, and preventing audience access to the back stage or to discrediting aspects of the performance (Goffman 1959).

Goffman also outlined the measures an audience uses to try to help the performers to save their performances. Audience members are invested in the actors’ performances, and will help the performers when necessary. Discretion (audience members intentionally avoiding aspects of the performance that the performers have not invited them to see) is one of the most important of these “protective measures;” audience members will often go out of their way to avoid these areas, or to announce their presence if they find themselves in a forbidden area (i.e., knocking or
clearing one’s throat) (Goffman 1959:229). Audience members try to act as tactfully as possible, ignoring the minor slips and mistakes in a performance, ignoring performances that they are not directly involved in, and curbing their own performances so as not to be disruptive or intrusive upon the performance. Even when a major mistake or discrediting event happens during a performance, the audience may actively work with the performer to preserve the performance. Finally, audiences often give additional leeway or consideration to a novice performer (Goffman 1959).

The salient factors Goffman brings to this research are the fact that in the context of sex toy parties, much of what is normally concealed in everyday interactions—learning curves, errors in previous performances, “secret pleasures,” etc.—are often actively revealed to the audience. Consultants often discuss what brought them to their choice of employment, how they learned about the products, their own use and evaluations of the products, mistakes they have made in previous party presentations—all of the “discrediting” information that Goffman argued people generally try to keep hidden. Yet many consultants are obviously able to maintain a presentation of self that is acceptable to the audience, because their financial success is dependent on repeat business and personal connection with their clientele. Indeed, the company would not survive if the consultants’ presentation of self alienated the audience.

Another of Goffman’s important contributions pertains to stigma. In *Stigma*, Goffman described the difference between an individual’s “virtual social identity” (what we expect the person’s identity to be) and their “actual social identity” (Goffman 1963:2). A stigma is an attribute which helps to create a large gap between a “virtual” and “actual” social identity. Goffman pointed out that stigmas change depending on the social relationship between individuals and their social groups—they are socially constructed (1963). There are two types of
stigma, according to Goffman. When a “discredited stigma” is present, the presence is known to all members of the audience (i.e., a physical deformity or disability). A “discreditable stigma,” on the other hand, is not readily known by the audience (i.e., sexual orientation). Goffman outlined two ways to deal with a stigmatized identity: “passing” or concealing the stigmatized attribute, and “covering,” which involves redirecting audience attention away from the stigmatizing feature (Goffman 1963).

Hefley (2007) outlined how individuals who frequent an adult-novelty store use a variety of strategies to manage the stigma they incur from purchasing pornography or sex toys, and many of these strategies are employed by consultants and attendees at a sex toy party. Hefley noted that some stigma management strategies were used primarily by men at the sex shop (i.e., coming to the store alone, being silent while in the store, spending minimal amounts of time in the store, delaying their entrance into the store until it appeared empty or, conversely, “bee-lining” into the store and exiting as quickly as possible). Still others (ignoring and maintaining physical distance between oneself and other customers, paying in cash) were used by both genders. Women were more likely to enter the store in groups, and they used an additional set of management strategies. These strategies largely consisted of what Hefley (2007:94-98) termed “accounts that provided rationalizations for visits or purchases” and consisted of entering the store while under the influence of intoxicants; attributing responsibility to others (either someone with them—a partner or a friend who “wanted to stop in here”—or someone for whom they are making a purchase); and the “claim of relative acceptability,” in which customers comment that “their own reasons for visiting the store were not as morally reprehensible as other customers’ reasons.” Existing research on sex toy parties indicates that the sex toy parties usually involve the consumption of alcohol; purchases are often made for the benefit of others (a sexual partner
or to help the hostess or consultant make more money from the party); and frequently involve guests discussing the “acceptability” of their own purchases in relation to other, more “morally questionable” products (McCaughey and French 2001; Storr 2003). In addition to those individuals who use “defensive” strategies to decrease the stigma they feel, there are those individuals who reject the negative label and the idea that their behavior is stigmatizing; instead, they attempt to “transform that identity into a positive and viable self-conception” (Kitsuse 1980:9). These “proactive strategies” (also known as tertiary deviance), as displayed by Hefley’s participants, included offering legal advice and support for the store, and organizing protests against groups who sought to remove adult stores from the community (2007). Kitsuse (1980) and Hefley (2007) argued that tertiary deviance is primarily used (often by members of a community, or on behalf of a community) to confront those who would label them as “deviant” and challenge their pre-existing beliefs. These proactive behaviors extend to sex toy party consultants, who often face discriminatory attitudes and behaviors when others learn of their work, or even from clients who perceive their work to be a discrediting stigma (Storr 2003).

Privacy and Social Structure

In addition to the important contributions that secrecy and privacy bring to one’s presentation of self and impression management, social relationships and the secrecy they contain are guided by and influence social structure (Simmel 1906:466). Simmel outlined how the size of a social group can influence the level and acceptability of secrecy. Small social circles or societies often have very low levels of secrecy because frequent and close contact between group members makes it difficult to keep a secret; moreover, social norms and stratification may make secrecy less necessary (or less acceptable). In addition, Simmel argued that as society has become more modern, the “affairs of people at large become more and more public, [and] those
of individuals more and more secret” (1906:468). In contemporary industrialized societies, people are more able to protect themselves from intrusions. In contrast, institutions in industrialized societies are less likely (and less able) to conceal information from citizens than they have historically. Schwartz noted that even the invasion of privacy can be understood differently by different members of a relationship: it may be “a duty, a privilege, or a transgression” depending on the perspective of those involved (1968:748). Parents’ duty to care for their child in some instances can override the child’s right to privacy, just as doctors’ invasion into the private lives of their patients is acceptable and is often viewed as doctors’ “duty” (Schwartz 1968).

In addition, the ability to have secrets may be a marker of power. Secrets themselves have power, Simmel argued, simply because others are excluded from having the information, regardless of whether the concealed information is actually valuable. Indeed, there need not be any secret information at all (e.g., when children say “I know something you don’t know” to inspire jealously in others). The value of secrets can be so great that the act of hiding information from others can imbue it with significance (Simmel 1906:464). Because secrets grant power to the secret-holder, there is the risk of betrayal if the information is shared—intentionally or unintentionally (Simmel 1906; Richardson 1988). Once the secret is known, the “discloser becomes a ‘psychological hostage’ of the listener” (Richardson 1988:213). The exchange of secrets, so common in intimate relationships, helps to negate the power imbalance, as now both members of the relationship have potentially damaging information about the other and so are less likely to betray the other, especially since disclosing private information is often a reciprocal process (Richardson 1988; Schwartz, 1968).
The ability to have privacy or to have a private space is also stratified—for example, high-ranking military officers have their privacy “insured structurally” through separate living quarters, whereas enlisted soldiers have little control over who has access to their living space, and so suffer more invasions of privacy (Schwartz 1968:743). Although Storr (2003) pointed out that some games and activities used in sex toy parties are conducted in the street (such as using a vibrator as a “microphone” to interview passing men) and the duration of sex toy parties are conducted in a semi-private space (a living room in a private home), a purely private space (a bedroom) is offered for ordering products—indicating that even in an intimate setting, there are degrees of privacy.

Schwartz (1968:744) argued that “extreme rank is conferred upon those for whom privacy shields are voluntarily removed”; we must confer a high status upon physicians if we are to be able to reveal private information (or our naked bodies). Conversely, we often “de-status” individuals of low social status who have access to private information or our private spheres—household help or assistants who may help us dress or bathe (Schwartz 1968:744). Additionally, “privacy is an object of exchange” that can be bought and sold—assuming one has the resources to purchase a private hotel room, train car, or rented room—and it is often regarded as a luxury for “those who could afford it” (Schwartz 1968:743). How privacy is constructed and the structural factors that contribute to decisions about privacy are important aspects to this research. What are appropriate solutions if the host does not have a private space to use as an ordering room? Is a door necessary to construct a “private” space, or are lowered voices and shielded purchases enough? Are consultants regarded as “high status” individuals (like a doctor or sex educator) or are they “de-statused” by the audience, making disclosures of private information less damaging?
An additional benefit of privacy is that it allows for “secret consumption” (Schwartz 1968:745). As both Simmel and Schwartz pointed out, “what is originally open becomes secret, and what was originally concealed throws off its mystery” (Simmel 1906:329). For example, consumption of pornography may have been viewed as a shameful activity to be engaged in privately, but cultural views about pornography have changed and its consumption has become more acceptable. Similarly, what was previously considered a behavior without public shame—having racist or sexist beliefs, for example—now must be hidden from public view. This concept plays an important role in the increasing availability of sexual aids. Vibrators, for example, could be found in mail-order catalogues and doctor’s offices as recently as the 1920s; their introduction into pornography removed their “medical” purpose and the devices became hidden on the shelves of pornography stores and sex shops (Maines 1999). As Ecks (2001) argued, the context in which a cultural object is found helps us to understand what frame should be applied; sex toys that are found in the home may be understood very differently than those that are found in pornographic films or used in a condom demonstration in a sex education class. Today, sex toys have entered an ambiguous public/private balance. While some sexual aids can be found on pharmacy shelves, sex toy parties are still invitation-only events held in private homes—simultaneously occupying a public and private space (Comella 2009).

THE SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF PRIVACY

Determining what is “private” is informed by the individual and social groups. While individuals may fluctuate in their decisions about what to reveal and when to reveal it, these decisions are also profoundly shaped by our social groups and the socialization processes we undergo in our social groups. An important theoretical contribution that helps us to understand the meaning that individuals construct from and for their social world comes from cognitive
sociology. Zerubavel outlined six important cognitive acts that guided my research of private disclosures at sex toy parties. They include perceiving (how we attend to objects in our environment, and how we “see” an object); focusing (what we attend to in our environment, and conversely, what we disattend to); classifying (how we categorize the world, and how we patrol the borders of those categories); signifying (the meaning we impart on our social world); remembering (what we are socialized to remember and how it is remembered) and timing (how we time and date our experiences).

Perceiving, Zerubavel argued, is guided by the social world we inhabit. We all undergo a process of “optical socialization,” wherein we learn to “see” things the way other members of our community view them. Sociologists, for example, are not born with the “sociological imagination” that they use to view the world; instead, they are taught to use that “mental lens” when they become members of the community (see Mills, 1959). These “mental lenses” are neither natural nor normal, and they can change over time, place, and for different subcultures (Zerubavel 1997). Zerubavel argued that there is no singular or “correct” way to view an object; while members of different “optical traditions” are socialized to view objects in much the same way, there can be a distinct “optical pluralism” that occurs when many different lenses exist at the same time. In addition, we are each members of many different “optical communities” that socialize us to “see” things in particular ways (Zerubavel 1997).

Sex toy parties create a distinct optical tradition and optical community among participants and consultants in which frank and open discussion of private sexual information (sexual identity, history and practices) are viewed as normative and are encouraged. In fact, consultants may be viewed as encouraging the guests to adopt new “mental lenses” with regards to sex toys themselves. Rather than seeing the toys as profane, pornographic objects, consultants
encourage their clientele to see the products they sell as legitimate means toward sexual fulfillment and relationship satisfaction (in particular, by using a “romantic evening” framework that they believe is easily understood by their guests). Consultants’ decisions to demonstrate some products and not others, the order in which products are demonstrated, and determinations about what can be “skipped” are due in large part to what consultants “see” as important.

Consultants may also present alternative “mental lenses” with regards to the disclosure of private information. If they reveal private information, or encourage the disclosure of such information, they show their clientele a different way of viewing private sexual information.

Attending, or focusing, encourages us to separate what is important in our environment from that which is unimportant. These “mental horizons” allow us to separate the “background” from the “foreground,” but they also involve some measure of “mental constriction” if we are to be able to separate the “figure” from the “ground” (Zerubavel 1997:37). “Mental horizons” can often serve as a form of social control, since our “norms of focusing” involve disregarding some factors and attending closely to others (Zerubavel 1997; Zerubavel 2006). Our focusing patterns are guided by and learned from our particular thought communities, indicating that what we attend to and what we disregard are not “normal” or “natural” (Zerubavel 1997).

Understanding what is focused on and what is disregarded at sex toy parties can help us to understand how consultants create an understandable framework for guests and also control disclosures of private information. Attending to cues in the environment (guests rolling their eyes, not making eye contact, or having “closed” body language such as crossed arms and lowered heads) can indicate to consultants that a guest is uncomfortable, perhaps because of another guests’ disclosures. In addition, there are a myriad of other cues in the environment that consultants must attend to in order to determine when the party will start and whether the guests
are still interested in the demonstration. Disattending or ignoring certain things is also important; consultants will often ignore guests who refuse to participate or who seem to have a “bad attitude,” because to attend to them would disrupt the environment they are trying to create. Some products are not shown at every party (e.g., products for anal sex), which indicates that consultants do not “see” those products as important compared to the products that they do elect to show. Consultants also attend to specific demographic information about their guests. Arousal creams (which are designed to create and heighten sexual stimulation) may not be shown to guests who are relatively young, because the consultant sees the average age of the guests and determines that those products are not particularly relevant for those guests. Toys and products that are designed for men (e.g., masturbation sleeves designed to go over the penis during masturbation) would not be shown to a party comprised of single women or women with female partners. Guests and consultants at sex toy parties must be able to attend to cues in the environment that signal the appropriateness, timeliness, and relevance of disclosure. In addition, they must be attuned to the signs that “over-disclosure” has happened or that their performance has been disrupted or discredited. Understanding what these cues are, and how they are understood and negotiated, is essential to understanding how self-disclosure in a semi-public setting is fostered.

Classifying involves how we organize our thinking and how we classify our social world. While classification is both universal and individual, it is also guided by the social groups of which we are members. Different cultural groups and subgroups divide the world in different ways, both in terms of the “norms of classification” that groups use and their different “styles” of dividing the world (Zerubavel 1997:56). There are major disputes over classification systems, both about where the boundaries between groups should be drawn and about whether the
classification system should exist in the first place. “Border patrolling” (how individuals keep the borders of their categories sharply demarcated when the demarcation is not “natural”) is an important aspect of the sociology of classification.

Classification (boundary work, border patrolling, etc.) is central to understanding what party consultants do. One of the clearest classifications that consultants help to create is the separation between men (who are generally prohibited from attending sex toy parties) and women. Consultants also create boundaries and borders between those objects that are considered “non-erotic” (shaving cream, perfumes, etc.) versus those that are considered “erotic” (e.g., male masturbatory sleeves and dildos). Boundaries are established between or among spaces (socializing, party, and private locations) and party stages. Understanding how these boundaries are drawn, made known, redrawn, and negotiated is an important part of understanding the meaning that disclosures have for individuals and social groups. Indeed, individuals concerned with their presentation of self are constantly “border patrolling” to demarcate back and front regions. Decisions about what information, behaviors, and aspects of the self are to remain in the “back stage” are constantly shifting, and boundaries are maintained in order to keep audience members from intruding and disrupting the performance.

A symbol, according to Zerubavel (1991:70), is based on “pure conventionality” rather than “absolute inevitability.” Because we undergo “semiotic socialization,” we are able to recognize the symbols we encounter that are “absolutely artificial” as having meaning (Zerubavel 1991:71). In addition, the meaning that we draw from symbols is not only from “their own inherent properties but from the way they are semiotically positioned in our minds vis-à-vis other symbols” (Zerubavel 1991:72). In the United States, pink is symbolic of femininity, but it has little meaning unless juxtaposed with blue for baby boys; the black attire of widows has little
meaning unless one considers the white dress of a bride. In essence, symbols allow us to separate the “unmarked” or “ordinary” from the “marked” or “special” (Zerubavel 1997).

Different symbols have different meanings when placed in different contexts; removing adult novelties from the storefront and placing them in the living room may imbue them with a different meaning altogether. Even the color of products can be symbolic; brightly colored sex toys have a different contextual understanding than those that are flesh-toned. Clothing serves as a symbol for both consultants and guests; most consultants wear “business casual” dress to parties, while guests do not. The fact that the parties are held in a private home (and not, say, a church basement or front yard) and are unisex symbolizes that this party will be different than other meetings, sales events, and parties. Consultants often use different techniques to symbolize “privacy” or a “private space” even when that space is in an open area. They, for example, may talk in hushed tones, point at items in catalogs instead of speaking out loud, and put themselves between the guest who is ordering and the rest of the guests. Consultants generally use a side room as an “ordering room” to allow guests some privacy when ordering. Although the parties themselves are private and are held in a private home, the use of these techniques demonstrates that a different level of privacy is being employed at the ordering stage of the party. This also indicates that the consultants (and, when this practice is required, the company) acknowledge that although frank sexual discussions occur during the presentation phase of the party, greater privacy is sought during the ordering phase. How consultants and attendees employ the use of symbols to encourage personal disclosure (and what subsequent disclosures symbolize) is important to understand what meaning these disclosures have.

Social groups play an important role also in guiding what and how we remember (and what and how we forget) “Mnemonic socialization” includes not just learning what to remember,
but how to use an interpretative lens to recall both facts and the “light in which we recall them” (Zerubavel 1997:87). “Mnemonic decapitation” occurs when we can recall a “memorable history” but a “practically forgettable” pre-history (Zerubavel 1997:85). Zerubavel has argued that the mnemonic traditions we are socialized into create schemas that encourage us to remember things that fit into our pre-existing schemas.

Many advertisements for sex toy parties describe the parties as “not your mother’s Tupperware party!” or “Tupperware parties with a twist!” (Alexander 2006a; Alexander 2006b). This is a catchy way to trigger a shared mnemonic framework that attendees can affix to the concept of the party, while also preparing them for a new and different experience—perhaps one their mother would not approve of. When the “past life” of the vibrator as a commonly-used medical device is ignored, “mnemonic decapitation” has occurred (Maines 1999). Consultants often begin their parties by “telling the story” of how they became consultants, including the first time they attended a party as a guest and how their families reacted to their decision. For the consultants, the parties serve as an “autobiographical occasion,” which offers the opportunity to “shape identity… and organize experiences and attach meaning to them” (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2000:57). Consultants use their story-telling not only to introduce themselves to their audience, but also as a way to form a bond with the guests, illustrating the importance of story-telling and identity for consultants.

The sociology of time and timing involves the use of time frameworks that are personal (e.g., “ten parties ago” or “the year I started selling sex toys”) and sociotemporal landmarks that are shared by the group (e.g., “after 9/11”) (Zerubavel 1997). In order to share our experiences with others, we must be able to convert our own personal time framework into a “standard time-reckoning framework” that everyone shares—year, month, day, hour—through agreed-upon
points of “periodization” (Zerubavel 1997; Zerubavel 2003). Even this “standard” of timing is not natural or logical. There are different forms of timing and times that are used by consultants to measure when a party starts, reaches a climax, ends (or should have ended). For example, consultants often use “event time” rather than “clock time” to determine when the party should start, when the party should shift into the next phase, and when the party should end (Levine 1997). Different understandings of time, punctuality, the “beginning” and “end” of a party and the “timeliness” of personal disclosures can certainly impact the understanding and meaning that individuals get from a party. How consultants construct and understand points of periodization—that is, the shifts between different stages of a party and how these stages are labeled and viewed—is also important to understanding the meaning and construction of time for consultants and guests. In addition, examining how the guests and consultants manipulate and structure time/timing in order to gain power offers insight into the social meaning that timing has for individuals and social groups.

Sex toy parties, then, present a unique social situation in which to study privacy and secrecy. On the surface, it appears that sex toy parties present a counter-narrative to the existing sociological literature about secrecy and privacy. The consultants—who would appear to be the most powerful at the parties (they are, after all, the knowledgeable expert imparting sexual knowledge)—in actuality might be the least powerful. Their success as a consultant is dependent upon their being able to successfully convey both their knowledge about their product and their ability to present an acceptable “self” to their audience. Given Schwartz’s argument that we give high status/rank to those for whom we are willing to reduce our privacy standards, one might posit that by revealing private sexual information to their audience, the consultants are actually granting power to the audience members. Similarly, many psychologists have noted that
disclosing private information is a reciprocal process. Consultants’ disclosures may prompt their audience to engage in the same disclosure process, which not only serves to bond the group but to encourage others to disclose. Consultants must tread a fine line between disclosure and concealment, humor and seriousness, all while attempting to keep the audience’s attention and preventing a discrediting event during their presentation of self. Sex toy parties can be comprised of groups of people as well-known to the consultant as her best friends or immediate family members. Given our society’s reluctance regarding discussions of sexuality and sexual disclosure, especially in settings that are semi-public, consultants must carefully tread a line between vulgarity and over-disclosure and prudish concealment.

This research seeks to address the following questions: How do consultants learn to walk these lines? How do they create an environment that is conducive to some disclosures, but not too much? How do they construct and maintain the boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate levels of disclosure? How do consultants manage disruptions in their performance or in the party environment, especially concerning issues of disclosure? How do they manage discrediting experiences? How do they manage the situation if an audience is “lost”? How do guests learn what level of disclosure is appropriate, and how do consultants and guests attempt to recover from violations of their privacy? Ultimately, my goal is to broaden our understanding of privacy, presentation of self, how disclosures of private information are framed, and how our membership in particular thought communities influences people’s decisions to disclose or conceal information.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This research consisted of 32 semi-structured interviews (see Table 3.1) of sex-toy party consultants and 20 observations of sex-toy parties. Combining these two data collection techniques allowed for a more in-depth analysis of the meaning and social importance of disclosures that occur at these parties. Pairing symbolic interactionism and cognitive sociology with grounded theory methods facilitated the development of theoretical insights that help to explain the creation and importance of privacy frames; how boundaries are created around frames; and how consultants and guests deal with violations of those boundaries. All interviews and observations took place from February 2011 to April 2012.

Snow (2004) argued that qualitative research is often critiqued for failing to make theoretical contributions; this occurs because of a “lack of robust vocabulary…that facilitates theoretical development and makes it a priority” (Snow 2004:133). Snow outlined three broad techniques of theoretical development that may encourage qualitative researchers to make theoretical connections: theoretical generation, theoretical extension, and theoretical refinement. Theoretical generation is often thought of in conjunction with Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) grounded theory methods; the problem, Snow contended, is that researchers often fail to “refine their analyses” or “proceed to the next step of fine-tuning and elaboration” (2004:134). The result, according to Snow, is that qualitative research is often “not very compelling and the logic of grounded theory as a means to theoretical generation is diluted” (2004:134).

Alternatives to theoretical generation are theoretical extension and theoretical refinement. Theoretical extension seeks to “[broaden] the relevance of a particular concept or theoretical system to a range of empirical contexts other than those in which they were developed or intended to be used” (Snow 2004:134). The use of theoretical refinement has the goal of
“modification of existing theoretical perspectives through extension” and it can occur in conjunction with theoretical extension (Snow 2004:134). While this dissertation had the larger goal of simultaneous theoretical generation, refinement, and extension, the primary goal was to extend and refine existing theory. The focus of this refinement/extension was Nippert-Eng’s (2010) general cognitive sociological theory of privacy and Goffman’s theory of impression management as it relates to semi-public disclosures of private information.

SAMPLING PROCEDURES

I originally approached the data collection and participant recruitment with the intent of using purposive sampling to create two comparison groups (inexperienced and experienced consultants, determined by the number of parties they had conducted and the number of recruits they had). The process of collecting data, though, demonstrated that what I thought would be useful categories were not, in fact, all that useful. The consultants varied widely on their number of recruits and the pace at which they recruited them. There were consultants who had been doing sex toy parties for several years yet did not have any recruits, and there were consultants who recruited their first new consultant only a day after starting their business. Moreover, it was nearly impossible to ascertain which sampling group a consultant would fit into until after I approached her to be interviewed; company websites and advertisements did not give any indication of their experience level or success. In the end, I employed convenience and snowball sampling. I asked participants to share my information with other consultants; attended training meetings and networked with new and more experienced consultants; used company newsletters and websites; and relied on referrals from consultants and word-of-mouth. Recruitment through company websites and company training meetings yielded the highest number of participants. The goal of the research was to conduct approximately 40 interviews and 40 observations, but
fewer were necessary because theoretical saturation was reached earlier than expected. Twenty-three of the interviews were conducted in person, and nine were conducted over the phone. Interview questions consisted largely of questions about how the consultant created an environment that fostered openness and sharing; the consultants’ sense of the amount of information that was shared at parties; and how they dealt with situations in which party guests over- or under-shared (see Appendix for interview schedule). The interview schedule was pilot tested with a key informant who had experience as a sex toy party consultant.

ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER

During the recruitment process, I contacted consultants in my sample by phone to see if they would be interested in participating in my research, and nearly all of the consultants I contacted expressed interest in participating. This initial success was mediated by the fact that, despite their interest in participating, it was difficult to get many of the consultants in my sample to commit to an interview appointment. In some cases, several months passed between our initial contact and the actual interview (if the interview happened at all); in a few cases, consultants did not come to our scheduled interview appointment or did not answer when I contacted them for our phone interview. I had the most success with the consultants I met at training meetings or though another consultant. These successes and failures early in the project shaped my later recruitment and observations, especially as it related to the importance of establishing rapport and remaining in contact with consultants over time.

In every case except one, I interviewed the consultant before my observation. One of first observations I did was with a consultant I had not interviewed prior to the party, and I was subsequently unable to schedule an interview with her, even after attempting to contact her over the course of several months. After this experience, I determined that it was important for me to
conduct an interview with the consultant prior to scheduling the observation. In terms of data collection and saturation, it seemed unlikely that I would get many party invitations through acquaintances, friends, and word-of-mouth (though I did eventually get a few); it became clear early in the data collection process that I would need to rely on the consultants to gain access to the parties. I believe that, most important, interviewing the consultant before observing her party (especially in-person interviews) helped me establish rapport with consultants. Meeting the consultants and talking with them for close to two hours allowed me to establish a relationship and trust with them, which I believed translated to both their and the hostesses’ willingness to allow me to observe one of their parties.

Scheduling observations presented additional challenges. I would contact consultants to see what their party schedule was like for the upcoming few weeks, and I learned that part of the challenge of being a sex toy party consultant (and consequently, doing research on sex toy parties) was that consultants’ schedules were often highly variable. Consultants would have weeks where they did not do any parties, followed by weeks where they were extremely busy. I depended on them to share their schedules with me, and this dependence was sometimes frustrating when consultants did not return my messages and I would spend several weeks in research limbo, awaiting the opportunity to observe parties. There were several consultants I interviewed that I was unable to schedule observations with, either because they never responded to my attempts to schedule one or because their parties occurred so infrequently that I was never able to observe them. I anticipated that this would happen, and I thought I was prepared for the fact that consultants might “drop out” of the study between the interview and observation. The experience of this, though, was more frustrating and disappointing than I imagined in the research design stage of this project, especially because I would experience long stretches of
time without parties and interviews, even though I was quite certain that consultants I had
interviewed were regularly doing parties. In all, I was able to observe 20 different consultants, 19
of whom I interviewed prior to the party; I was never about to schedule an interview with the
remaining consultant. Of the 12 consultants I did not observe, five of them did parties very
infrequently (only a few times a year), and an additional five consultants stopped doing parties
shortly after our interview. Another consultant lived in another region of the country and also
could not be observed, and although the remaining consultants regularly did parties, I was unable
to schedule observations with them.

I relied on the consultants to help me gain access to the parties. Consultants would ask
the hostess, on my behalf, whether or not she and her guests would be comfortable with my
attending and observing the party. Several times (especially for “occasion parties,” like
bachelorette parties), hostesses would not approve the observation. This often meant that I had a
few “false starts” with each consultant, wherein we had chosen a party for me to observe and the
hostess declined to participate. Once I arrived at the parties (all of which took place in the
southern United States, in three states), I met the consultant at the hostess’ home and followed
her inside. Once inside, I mingled with the guests, introducing myself, explaining the purpose of
my visit, and discussing with the guests whether they were comfortable with my staying to
observe. I usually tried to help the consultant in any way that I could, which usually meant
helping to carry her demonstration kit and inventory inside. This often meant several trips from
the car to the hostess’ home, carrying suitcases, rolling toolboxes, or duffel bags filled with
products (sometimes up flights of stairs into upstairs bedrooms, where ordering would take
place). I would chat with the consultant and the gathering guests while she set up the
demonstration and we waited for the party to begin. We often waited for a long time; only two of
the parties I observed started within 30 minutes of the original start time, and on more than one occasion the consultant and I waited over an hour for the party to start.

Immediately before the demonstration began, the consultant would introduce me to the assembled guests. At that point, I would again explain my purpose for being there, and the informed consent procedures, and I would pass out the waiver of informed consent paperwork. I was never asked to leave a party because a guest was uncomfortable with my presence, nor did any participants (guests, hostess, or consultants) withdraw from the study. Overall, the guests were very interested in my presence, and wanted to know how I was drawn to sex toy party research. In most cases, though, they were interested more in talking to the other guests and starting the demonstration than in my presence. Few seemed concerned about participating in the research; my reassurances that I would not be recording their names or identifiable details (or, as one guest put it, “changing names to protect the not-so-innocent”) and the consultant vouching for me seemed to assuage people’s fears.

During the party itself, I would usually try to sit or stand outside of the semi-circle of chairs in a position that would allow me to see both the consultant and most of the guests. I believed that if I sat with the guests and participated in the party, they would be constantly reminded of my presence and would alter their behavior. Usually, the consultant would provide me with a catalog when she distributed them to the guests, and I would use the catalog to jot down field notes during the course of the party (and, the catalog also helped me blend in with the guests and disguise my jottings). I also carried a small notebook with me, which I sometimes used during the party if I wanted to note something in more detail. I took more field notes during my earliest observations, as I got accustomed to the pacing of the party, the products, and the way they were demonstrated. After the party was over, I would come home and take detailed
field notes, following the order of the demonstration. Completing my field notes would often take two to three hours.

I believe that, in general, my attempts to remain unobtrusive during the observations were successful, though sometimes guests and the consultants thwarted my efforts to be invisible. During Jackie’s party, one guest asked me several times (in a lighthearted, joking manner), whether I was taking notes, because the material she was providing me was “golden.” During Melinda’s party, she used me as the mechanism for her to deliver a punch line, as the following excerpt from my field notes discussed:

When she began her discussion of anal sex, she stated the first time they try to have anal sex, lots of women report that it is like “dolphin sex.” “Do you ladies know what dolphin sex is?” When the guests were confused and said they did not know what she was talking about, she said, “Oh, you’ve never heard of dolphin sex? Amanda, you must have heard of dolphin sex—you’ve been to tons of these parties.” When I said that I had never heard of dolphin sex (which was true—this joke was new to me), she said, “It’s basically where you bend over” (here, she bent over slightly, as if she was bending to tie her shoe, and flapped her hands behind her, like they were fins) “and he comes up from behind you, and you go (in a high-pitched tone, like a dolphin makes) ‘E! e! e!’” The group laughed uproariously.

Even in this case, where I was directly involved as part of Melinda’s demonstration, I do not believe that it disrupted the party or my persona as researcher in any way. In other instances, consultants used me as a resource during the party; sometimes I gave them batteries for toys (I carried them with me for the recorder I used during interviews). Sometimes (but only when asked), I clarified their statements to guests. For example, during Britney’s party, one of the guests asked for clarification on where the g-spot was and how to stimulate it. Britney struggled to explain it to the guest, and she turned to me and said, “I’m sure you talk about this stuff all the time. Can you explain it better than I can?” I tried to describe it the way I had heard other consultants explain it, and then Britney resumed the demonstration.
After the party, I was sometimes invited by the consultant to observe the ordering process, as long as the guests consented. I never suggested this to the consultants, as I assumed it would make guests and consultants uncomfortable to have me in the ordering room. I was wrong about that. The first time I was invited to sit in the ordering room was at Candace’s party, where during my introduction she simply stated that I would be in the ordering room with her, if the guests allowed it. While in the ordering room—which I observed at about 13 parties, if the consultant, guests, and my own schedule allowed it—I never took notes. Also, if the consultant wanted me to help her, I would find the products the guests ordered in the consultant’s inventory and put them into bags (by the end of my observations, I had learned the product lines quite well), or I would go out to the consultant’s car and get other products if she needed them. The guests seemed unbothered by my presence in the ordering room, and only once was I asked to step out while a guest talked with the consultant. In that instance, the consultant was being observed by a trainee whom the guest knew as an old acquaintance, so it was difficult to know whether it was my presence or the trainee’s that made the guest uncomfortable.

During the ordering room process, I took the opportunity to engage in a sort of debriefing with the consultant. Between customers, we would discuss whether this party seemed to be representative of her average party; whether she thought the demonstration went well; whether I got good information for my research; and whether the guests appeared to enjoy themselves. This allowed me not only to process the party with the consultant, but to discuss with her things I had noticed during the party, or to ask her questions about her demonstration and/or guests’ reaction to some products. These debriefing sessions, minor as they were, allowed for some of the most interesting information I gathered in relation to privacy and the sex toy party frame. For example, this is where I learned that Candace’s extended example during the party about “a
friend” who tried a product was actually from her own experience, illustrating that people used a variety of mechanisms to disclose private sexual information without damaging their presentation of self. This debriefing process also gave me insight into how employing the sex toy party frame allowed for people to disclose information and ask questions that in other circumstances would be viewed as invasive, like when Kendra asked a guest whether her male partner was “well endowed.” In some instances, though, I was either not invited into the ordering room or I was unable to observe it because of scheduling conflicts on my part or a long commute home from the party location. Even in these cases, however, I tried to stay as long as I could and observe one or two guests in the ordering room; at the very least, I tried to help the consultant pack up her demonstration before the ordering room process began. When the ordering room process was completed (or when I had to leave), I always thanked the consultant, the hostess, and the remaining guests for their time and participation, and reiterated the consent and study withdrawal procedures.

Overall, I found the experience of conducting this research very enjoyable. While the process of scheduling interviews and observations was sometimes frustrating, I enjoyed doing the interviews, and I really enjoyed the parties. Consultants never pressured me to make purchases or host parties for them (and I never purchased any items from my participants), though several of them suggested that, when I had completed my dissertation, I should become a consultant. I always tried to deflect these comments with a non-committal response like, “Well, I have a while before I finish school,” or, more commonly, that becoming a sex toy party consultant while trying to conduct research on sex toy parties would likely be a conflict of interest. Overall, I found my interviewees to be extremely kind, forthright, and entertaining. I had assumed that it would take an outgoing and gregarious personality to sell sex toys, and in
most cases, my interviewees fit the bill, and they offered me thoughtful and introspective answers. In addition, many of the consultants told me that they enjoyed the process of being interviewed, and that many of my questions caused them to reflect more on their business practices, the training they received (and that they offered their recruits), and on privacy in general. The experience of observing sex toy parties was genuinely fun (though occasionally exhausting), and I truly enjoyed attending and observing them.

SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS

The focus of my research was on the consultants and their experiences in the business; I did not interview or survey guests. Unless guests vocalized their motivations for their disclosures during an observation, I am unable to state with certainty what motivated guests to disclose or not disclose private information. Despite this, consultants did speculate on guests’ motivations, and these speculations are important to my analysis because it likely shapes how consultants understand their work and the effectiveness of their demonstration and presentation of self. I did document some demographic information about party guests in my field notes. In most cases, I tried to record the relationship between the guests (whether they were family, friends, or co-workers), and I often estimated the guests’ ages. I noted in my field notes whether or not the guests were racially heterogeneous or homogeneous, and whether the consultant was a member of the same racial group as the majority of the guests, but I did not attempt to discern the racial identity of specific guests. Unless guests disclosed their sexual identity during a party, I did not speculate on the sexual identities of guests.

The consultants I interviewed were a diverse group. They came from a wide variety of races and educational backgrounds, were of different ages, and represented a broad range of success in the business (see Table 3.1). The average age of the consultants at the time of
interview was 32, and the majority of the consultants were between the ages of 26 and 34. The range of ages was quite broad: the youngest consultants were 21 and the oldest was 47. The majority (59.3 percent, n=19) of the consultants were white, but more than 20 percent of my sample was African-American (n=7), and more than 18 percent (n=6) were Hispanic or mixed race. In terms of the party guests, there were few racially integrated parties; in most cases, the majority of the guests were either white or African-American. In a few cases, the consultants and the guests were of different races, but in the majority of cases the consultants and the guests appeared to be of the same race. I never observed a party where the consultant told me lesbian, bisexual, or queer women were in attendance, though it is highly likely that sexual minority women attended the parties, and either the consultant or I (or both) were unaware of it.

More than 60 percent of the consultants were married (n=20), and an additional one-third (n=10) had never been married. In terms of educational attainment, all of the consultants had graduated from high school, and the majority had either attended some college (40.6 percent, n=13) or had earned a bachelor’s degree (34.3 percent, n=11). Two of my respondents had earned graduate or professional degrees. I asked my respondents to choose an income category to indicate their annual household income (rather than asking them to write in their answer), so a mean is not possible in this case. The modal category for household income was more than $80,000 per year, and more than two-thirds (68 percent, n=22) earned more than $50,000 per year as a household. Two of my respondents earned less than $20,000 per year, one of whom was a currently-enrolled student.

Successful management of any type of direct sales business—including sex toys—involves having a full party schedule and recruiting new consultants (Prus and Frisby 1990; Storr 2003). I asked three specific questions to better understand the consultants’ level of success in
the business: their annual income from the party plan business, the number of consultants they currently had working “under” them, and the number of parties they did per month. In addition, I asked my respondents how long they had been doing parties when they recruited their first “daughter.” This was intended to create distinct sampling groups, but this attempt at purposive sampling, as I mentioned, was abandoned approximately halfway through data collection when it became apparent that experience level did not hinge solely on how many parties or recruits a consultant had. I also asked the length of time they had worked for their current company (see Table 3.2).

The consultants I interviewed had been with their company on average 2.6 years, with a range of less than one month to more than 10 years. Only one participant had been employed by more than one sex toy party company, and she had recently switched when I interviewed her, having spent more than two years with her previous company and less than a month with her company. The women also had varied levels of success in recruiting new consultants. The vast majority of the consultants had at least one recruit (82 percent, n=27), but it is important to note that having a recruit (or not) was not always indicative of a “new arrival” who simply had not been able to recruit a new consultant yet. Most of the consultants who did not have a recruit had been doing parties for more than six months; one consultant had been doing parties for more than three years and had not yet recruited a consultant. In a few of these cases, the consultants viewed having recruits as a responsibility that they were unwilling to take on, so they did not pursue potential recruits (even though the consultants acknowledged that this limited their earning potential). In addition, having recruits did not always imply that one was “well-established” in the business at the time of first recruitment; in fact, two of my participants signed up their first consultant at their very first party, and three other participants did so within the first month after
becoming a consultant. The mean length of time between signing up and getting a new recruit was six months.

Another measure of “success” in the business was the number of parties that consultants did. The average number of parties per month for my sample was five, but this could range from a low of less than one per month to a high of over 10 per month. Consultants often had to estimate the number of parties they had done, and most indicated that there were months they were less active (because they had trouble recruiting hostesses, because they were ill or on maternity leave, etc.) and months they were much busier.

Income generated from sex toy party business also spanned a broad range, but it is important to note that the number of parties and the number of recruits greatly impacted consultants’ earnings. Because of the structure of multi-level marketing, wherein one earns income from the corporation based on the sales of one’s recruits, those who had larger teams earned more than those with smaller teams (which often allowed them to maintain a less-busy party schedule). An additional factor that impacted income from sales was the buying discount that consultants received, which could fluctuate based on the company they worked for and the company policies at the time they signed up. The level of discount that many consultants received when they wanted to buy inventory/product often depended on what level the consultant “bought in” at (i.e., the initial price of the kit). This impacted their earnings. For example, a consultant who signed up at the highest level often received a 50 percent buying discount, meaning that she purchased inventory at a 50 percent discount from the price the guests would pay; the remainder was her profit. Other consultants who signed up at a lower level (or at a different time, if the company changed their policy) often received a 40 percent discount, which meant that their profit margin was lower. Higher buying discounts could be “earned,” in some
cases, by achieving certain sales or recruitment milestones. Because of all of these factors, the income levels of the consultants varied greatly and were difficult to accurately measure. The mean income from sales was nearly $20,000, but this ranged from no income (i.e., the consultant spent all of her earnings on maintaining her business), to income of more than $100,000 per year (before accounting for the amount spent on the business) (see Table 3.3). Most of the consultants I interviewed had some other form of paid employment (many part-time or seasonally), though over one-third did not have employment outside of the home. The location and economic level of the guests varied; a wide range of socioeconomic classes were represented, and the parties were well distributed across rural, suburban, and urban areas.

DATA ANALYSIS

Grounded theory methods (GTM), as originally put forth by Glaser and Strauss (1967), were used to guide data analysis. Although some researchers have argued that GTM are primarily inductive, others have argued that GTM blend induction, deduction and verification. As Strauss (1987) noted, induction, deduction and verification are “absolutely essential” to any research employing GTM; indeed, it would be impossible to pretend our preconceived ideas and hypotheses about a subject do not influence our analysis (see also LaRossa 2005).

GTM are based on the premises of symbolic interactionism and the constant comparative method. Symbolic interactionism assumes: that individuals “act toward things based on the meanings that the things have for them”; that those meanings are based in social interactions; and that if people are to use these meanings, they must undertake an interpretative process that involves the revision and transformation of meanings (Blumer 1969:2-5). It was symbolic interactionism that inspired Glaser and Strauss to develop a set of methods that would allow researchers to view social interaction and process in the context in which they occur. Glaser and
Strauss’ main goal was to encourage researchers to develop theory that had been rigorously and systematically derived from the data (Strauss 1987; LaRossa 2005). GTM have a number of generally accepted phases and features. Theory generation; theoretical sampling; open, axial, and selective coding; and theoretical saturation are often viewed as the GTM “canon” (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

The constant comparative method is a critical element of GTM’s ability to empirically generate theory (Glaser 1965). Under the constant comparative method, the researcher is always referring back to the coding he or she has done before and making comparisons between different variables, concepts, and indicators. The purpose of the constant comparative method is to systematically develop theory through close comparison across different phases of analysis, as well as generating a theory that is derived very closely from the data (Glaser 1965). The constant comparative method helps a researcher to develop theory because it requires that he or she make sense of how variables, concepts, and incidents are related. Ideally, the researcher begins to generalize the theory so that it is applicable to a larger phenomenon than the one the researcher was originally studying (Glaser 1965).

Theoretical sampling involves deciding, based “on analytic grounds, what data to collect next and where to find them” (Strauss 1987:38). Theoretical sampling can be implemented in a variety of ways, including “changing interview styles, sites, or participants; [following] up on recurring patterns in participants data; and asking key participants to give more information on categories that seem central to the emerging theory” (Draucker, Martsolf, Ross, and Rusk 2007:1138). With this perspective and sampling methodology in mind, I allowed the emerging variables and the connections between them to guide the sampling process. Because it was impossible for me to gather demographic data on potential interviewees until after I contacted
them, I could not theoretically sample consultants using their background characteristics. Instead, I focused my theoretical sampling on the party observations and the content of the interviews. As the different phases of coding revealed the importance of framing with regards to privacy, I focused my observations and field notes on how consultants framed the parties, rather than focusing, for example, on how the consultant presented the products. I paid closer attention to consultants’ and guests’ responses to privacy violations, noting more carefully how violations might have occurred because guests were “out of frame,” and what consultants did to get guests “back in frame.” In addition, I focused mostly on the importance of privacy, the creation of private spaces, privacy violations, reactions to those violations and paid less attention to the consultants’ entry into the sex toy party business and the training they received. I also took care to note whether the consultant’s privacy-related statements during the interview (i.e., whether she revealed private information about herself during the parties, what techniques she said she used to control disclosure) reflected her conduct during the party. This last technique was particularly informative because it revealed that while consultants often said they revealed little to no personal sexual information during the parties, in actuality they revealed quite a lot (though these disclosures were often disguised or occurred in private ordering rooms). Theoretical sampling continued until theoretical saturation (when continued sampling and coding appeared to add no new variables or concepts) was achieved (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006; LaRossa 2005; Strauss 1987). The use of theoretical sampling and the constant comparative method allows for a stronger, more data-driven theory. Moreover, theoretical sampling reinforces the inductive-deductive process of GTM. By allowing the data to guide the theory, the inductive nature of GTM shines through; by letting the developing theory guide new sampling, the deductive nature of GTM is revealed (Becker 1993).
and deductive methods not only allows the researchers to strengthen the theory, but it allows
them to refine the theory and create a theory that is “conceptually dense” (Becker 1993:256).

CODING

Grounded theory methods are marked by a specific technique of analyzing the data: open,
axial, and selective coding. Although these methods appear to be linear, using the constant
comparative method requires that the researcher be constantly comparing incidents in each
category to see if they fit, and writing memos to keep a record of the ideas, conflicts, and
theoretical links that emerge as coding progresses. The researcher begins to “ask generative
questions” and develop conceptual linkages between incidents (Strauss 1987:272).

Coding is the “first step in moving beyond concrete statements in the data to making
analytic interpretations” (Charmaz 2006:43). In accordance with the constant comparative
method, one proceeds in a cyclical rather than linear fashion from one phase of coding to the
next. It is important to note, however, that during any point of the coding process one of the
phases may come to the forefront (LaRossa 2005).

Open coding begins with a careful analysis of the data, often a line-by-line or word-by-
word analysis using. The use of the concept-indicator model (Glaser 1978) is an invaluable part
of the open coding stage of data analysis. An indicator is a form of text in the document being
coded; a concept is the label or name given to the indicator. The key element in concept
formation is asking questions such as “what is being talked about?” (Strauss 1987; LaRossa
2005:841). This involves constant comparison between the developed concepts, the indicators
associated with them, and the new indicators, to see if they “fit” together. For this research, I
used Nvivo to help me to organize my indicators into concepts—sometimes multiple concepts—
and to easily retrieve the concepts and indicators for continued analysis.
In order to theoretically saturate a concept, a researcher needs multiple indicators for that concept. But concepts should not be too restrictive or too abstract; in the extreme, this could result in thousands of concepts, each with one indicator (too restrictive), and only one concept for every indicator (too abstract) (LaRossa 2005). When creating concepts, the researcher is moving from one level of abstraction to a higher level of abstraction. Developing variables is about “arraying” concepts—a researcher takes a few related concepts and thinks about how they might be related under a larger heading. Variable development in this sense is equivalent to the general process of dimensionalization (LaRossa 2012).

Offering an example of how I coded might make the process a bit clearer. Table 3.4 includes an excerpt from my interview with Melinda and demonstrates how I coded it under a variety of concepts. During this portion of the interview, she was discussing the types of games that she played at parties, and how guests sometimes would ask personal questions about her sex life during the games. This section of the interview included information about how she deflected those questions if she did not want to answer them. This whole section was coded under the variable “purposive games,” but several smaller portions of the quote were coded under different concepts, which can be seen Table 3.4.

Dimensionalization can be seen in those statements that fell into the variable called “deflecting personal questions” (see Figure 3.1). This variable was largely comprised of techniques that consultants used to steer guests away from asking personal questions about the consultant (the “concepts”). These concepts are all related to the notion of deflecting personal questions rather than answering them (which was a separate variable). Included within the larger variable of “deflecting personal questions” are other concepts not seen in this excerpt from Melinda’s interview. One example of these other concepts is a code called “our bodies/tastes are
different,” which included instances where the consultants told guests that what the consultants liked the guests might not like (see Figure 3.1). Within each of these concepts are many indicators from different consultant interviews that “talk about” the same idea.

Dimensionalization leads to the next phase in the process: axial and selective coding. During axial coding, more analysis is done around one variable at a time using the paradigm items of strategies/tactics, interactions, and consequences. A researcher chooses a “focal variable,” which is a variable that is placed temporarily at the center of analysis, and the research “explicitly examines” the relationships between and/or among variables. It is at this stage, LaRossa (2005:849) contended, that “GTM begins to fulfill its theoretical promise”; that is, if by theory we mean explanation. In GTM, explanation involves hypothesizing about the relationships between variables. Axial coding, thus, is essential for theoretical development in a GTM-based project. I began the process of axial coding quite early in the analysis, looking for connections between the variables as I coded and creating memos and sketches of variables and their connections. Several variables served as “focal variables” for me as the coding and analysis progressed. Given the large amount of data I had collected, I had dozens of variables that fluctuated in importance over the course of data analysis as I developed linkages between variables and hypotheses about how the variables were related.

Selective coding is the final stage in the coding process (Strauss 1987). At this stage the researcher determines what the central variable (or “core variable”) will be in the analysis. There are many criteria that can be used to select the core variable, but at a minimum it should be theoretically saturated and “centrally relevant” to the story that is being told (Glaser 1978:95-96; see also LaRossa 2005:851-852). With the core variable in mind, the researcher continues the coding process, attending especially to those concepts and variables that relate to the core
variable). Further theoretical sampling (with the researcher seeking out new samples based on the core variable) may also take place at this point (Strauss 1987). The process of coding continues until the concepts and variables have been theoretically saturated—that is, until continued analysis adds no new discoveries about concepts and variables (Strauss 1987). The strongest theories will also be theoretically saturated, occurring when “all of the main variations of the phenomenon have been identified and incorporated into the emerging theory” (Guest et al. 2006:65).

In this study, the variable that eventually took center stage and became the “core variable” was the variable I called “privacy frame mismatches.” The creation of this variable was informed by Nippert Eng’s (2010) idea that all privacy violations resulted from being “out of frame” with regards to how private an individual regards some information compared to how the rest of the group views things. This variable connected with many of the other variables (including methods consultants used to construct privacy frames, techniques to prevent mismatches, and how individuals at sex toy parties recovered from situations where someone was “out of frame”). Once chosen, it guided the closing phases of my analysis and my writing.
Table 3.1 Consultant Demographics (N = 32)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age (mean=32)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-25</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-34</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>43.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>31.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45 and older</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Answered</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>59.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Race</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single/Never Married</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>31.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>62.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Educational Level</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Graduate</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9.375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>40.625</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate’s Degree</td>
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<td>9.375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>34.375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate/Professional Degree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Length of Time with Company (mean=2.6 years)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than a year</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 1-2 years</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>31.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 2-4 years</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>28.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 4-6 years</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 6 years</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.2 Business Information for Consultants (N = 32)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Parties per Month (mean=5)</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Five or fewer per month</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>53.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10 per month</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>43.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 10 per month</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Recruits (mean=20)</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>46.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-49</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 or more</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15.65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of Time Before First Recruit (mean=6 months)</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No recruits</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One day/party</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within the first month</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between one and three months</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between four and six months</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between seven months and twelve months</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than a year</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9.375</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income from Sales (mean=$19,476)</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$0-$10,000</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>31.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$10,001-$20,000</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>34.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$20,001-$30,000</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$30,000-$40,000</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than $40,000</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.4: Open Coding

And I’ll tell ‘em, like when I do the game, I’ll tell ‘em, you know, “No product questions and my personal sex life is none of your business.”
And sometimes I’ll get a, “Well, what’s your favorite product?”
I’m like, “Hmm…my favorite product I like personally, or top seller?”
“[Your] personal [favorite].”
“Now remember…”

“Ok, your top seller.” Just change it, shift it.
They’ll shift it if you guide ‘em.

deflecting personal questions: telling guests not to ask
deflecting personal questions: using sales/product information
deflecting personal questions: telling guests not to ask
deflecting personal questions: using sales/product information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3.3 Consultant Demographics, Continued (N = 32)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Annual Household Income</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$20,000 or less</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$20,001-$30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$30,001-$40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$40,001-$50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50,001-$60,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$60,001-$70,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$70,001-$80,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than $80,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other Paid Employment</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

65
Figure 3.1. Variable-Concept-Indicator Model (adapted from LaRossa [2005])
CHAPTER 4: “I CAME IN THE BUSINESS THINKING ‘THIS IS A PERSONAL AND PRIVATE THING,’ SO I SHOULD KEEP IT THAT WAY”: PRIVACY FRAMES

The state of privacy (that is, a certain behavior or information which is hidden or inaccessible to others), according to Nippert-Eng (2010), is rarely an absolute. Rather than thinking about privacy (or the desire/ability to keep something private) as a binary system, Nippert-Eng proposed that privacy existed on a continuum. At one end is “public, which is completely accessible by others” and at the other end is “private, which is completely inaccessible by others.” Privacy, thus, is “a condition of relative inaccessibility” that involves constant negotiation between the extreme ends of the continuum (Nippert-Eng 2010:4, 5).

Conceptualizing privacy as a continuum allows us to consider the fact that privacy and publicity are inversely related; as something becomes more public it becomes less private (and vice versa). A continuum also helps us to understand why issues of privacy and publicity are so complex; not only does each require the cooperation of others, but conceptualizing privacy as a continuum encourages us to think about the gradations of privacy that are possible. Even slight movement on the continuum can change our understanding of how we have managed our privacy, and as Nippert-Eng (2010:5) argued, “it is fairly easy to make mistakes and/or intentionally challenge the amount of either that is actually present.” Where these lines are drawn—the boundaries between public and private—are not based, in other words, solely on individual decisions. The boundaries require others’ acknowledgment and understanding. It is nearly impossible to keep something private if others are constantly challenging the decision to make that information inaccessible to them. In this way, creating and maintaining privacy is an intrinsically social act.
Many of the boundaries that are drawn regarding privacy and publicity are a result of cultural frames that we have been socialized to use. Zerubavel (1991:11) argued that “framing is the act of surrounding situations, acts, or objects with mental brackets that basically transform their meaning by defining them.” These frames allow us to recognize, interpret, and respond to the myriad social situations that we are confronted with every day. As Goffman (1974:21) pointed out, a frame often seems to be subconscious; when we use a frame, we are “likely to be unaware of such organized features as the framework has and [we would be] unable to describe the framework with any completeness if asked, yet these handicaps are no bar to easily and fully applying it.” We often do not fully understand where our frames come from, or even what they “are,” but we use them anyway. For example, in her study of the cultural frames applied to nudity, Ecks’ (2001) participants were able to recognize and distinguish “pornographic nudes” from “artistic nudes,” even if they could not completely articulate what demarcated the two frames. Over time, different frames enter our culture, social relationships, and our individual thought patterns, making them seem personal, but in fact they are profoundly social in nature.

Sexuality and sexual behaviors are commonly situated on the “more private” end of the continuum. Many of the consultants discussed this during our interviews; they often stated that they felt they had to address the “elephant in the room” at the start of the party: “When you talk about sex...I always tell, that’s one of my things I always tell, you know, a little background about myself because, ‘You’re gonna be talking sex with me and you don’t want to talk sex with strangers, and we’re going to get very intimate.’”

Laney addressed the cultural idea that talking about sex with strangers, if not forbidden, was something that made women uncomfortable and something that they would be reluctant to do. This reluctance stems specifically, it seems, from having to discuss personal sexual
information (i.e., in what practices one engages, one’s level of sexual satisfaction, etc.). These issues are often regarded as extremely private—shared with very few individuals, if any—and discussions of sexuality are acceptable only if they do not become “too personal.” As philosopher James Rachels (1999:3) noted, “You may think we’re all very sophisticated, and we can talk about sex as much as we want without anybody being shocked or embarrassed. But that is true only if we keep the discussion abstract—only if we don’t make it personal.”

There are instances, though, in which private sexual information is discussed openly. Though these instances do not always occur in semi-private areas, they do often occur with virtual strangers (e.g., doctors and other medical professionals). Cognitive sociology allows us to examine the frames in which discussions about private sexual matters are deemed appropriate, if not beneficial—despite the fact that many Americans regard sex as one of the “final taboos” that should not be discussed with people with whom we are not well acquainted. My interviews and observations make it clear that, despite the notion that sex is often regarded as too embarrassing to discuss (Gott, Galena, Hinchliff, and Elford 2005; Marwick 1999) or as a taboo topic (Herbenick, Reece, and Hollub 2009), discussions of sex and sexuality are deemed acceptable when they occur within specific cultural frames. The medical/informational frame, pornographic frame, and (as elucidated here) sex toy frame are used to shape the meaning of discussions of sexuality and sexual behavior and that help us understand the nature of privacy regarding sex and sexuality (see Figure 4.1). The key feature that distinguishes the frames from one another is how explicitly and concretely sex was discussed; in other words, whether the information that is discussed is abstract or comprised of personal information. Nippert-Eng (2010) argued that privacy and publicity are inversely related, and abstraction and concretization are similarly related. As the abstractness of our discussions increases, the specificity and “personalness” of
those disclosures decreases. As Rachels (1999) discussed, we are often comfortable with disclosure that remains abstract, and become increasingly uncomfortable as the discussions become more and more specific and personal.

Each of the frames requires the user to discuss sex at a slightly different level of abstraction. For the vast majority of the public, it seems as if two frames exist: the medical/informational frame and the pornographic frame. These frames seem to create a binary: discussions of sexuality are either abstract and vague or they are personal and specific. Instead of viewing these frames as creating a binary, in this chapter I argue that these frames are essentially on opposite ends of the “abstraction/concretization” continuum (see Figure 4.2). At the “high” end of abstraction is the medical and informational frame. In this frame, discussions of sex that occur are often very abstract; there is often little personal information revealed, and discussions revolve not around the individual, but about sex as an abstract concept. In addition, these discussions of sexual practices often take place in health care or educational settings, and this frame is marked by both the sterile physical environment and by power differences between the doctor/education and the patient/student.

At the “low” end of abstraction is the pornographic frame. Within the pornographic frame, discussions of sexual practices are graphic both physically and verbally (i.e., through mimicking/enactment of sex acts and the use of slang terms to describe sexual acts or body parts). Discussions about sex in the pornographic frame encourage users to visualize themselves in that situation, evoking a stimulated or aroused reaction (unlike those that occur in the medical/informational frame). In short, abstract discussions within the medical/informational frame are about sex, but they are not meant to be sexy, whereas the opposite is true for discussions in the pornographic frame. Because these cultural frames transform the meaning of
disclosures, the same discussion can take place in any of these frames and the frame will dramatically alter the meaning that is derived from that conversation. For example, a discussion of a man’s erectile dysfunction could be medical in nature, if the discussion focused on the medical causes, consequences, and solutions to erectile dysfunction in an abstract way rather than on the impact such difficulty could have on men or their intimate relationships. The same discussion could be pornographic in nature, as when Michaela described men with sexual difficulty as having “whisky dick” or being “two pump chumps” during her party. This characterization of sexual difficulty was seated more firmly in the pornographic frame because it relied on raunchier language (“dicks” and “pump”), and evoked sexual acts. In addition, this framing of sexual dysfunction was poorly received by guests, who shifted uncomfortably in their seats and did not make eye contact with each other or Michaela.

For the consultants I interviewed, these frames served as counterpoints (and as building blocks) for a third frame: the sex toy party frame. Because it exists in the middle of the continuum of abstract to concrete discussions of sex, the sex toy party frame is both somewhat different and similar to the other frames allowing the consultants to develop a frame that is both familiar and different from those that were already recognizable to guests. Consultants chose elements of each of the existing frames to include in the sex toy party frame while discarding others, creating a frame that was similar enough to make guests comfortable, yet unique enough to accomplish their goals of education, bonding, and sales. Consultants encouraged guests to reveal some private information (i.e., to extol the virtues of products they had used, to ask questions, and to try out [some] products during the party), but carefully discouraged disclosures that were too personal or explicit. In addition, the consultants presented themselves as knowledgeable friends rather than socially distant medical professionals, though they were
careful not to present themselves as objects of the pornographic gaze (i.e., by carefully monitoring their body and verbal language). The development of this new frame offered guests a different way of viewing and understanding the disclosures of private information that occurred at sex toy parties, but the boundaries of the frame had to be quickly taught and reinforced if the frame was to be applied correctly and successfully. The consultants were, to use Nippert-Eng’s (2010) language, teaching the “dance of privacy” to the guests. This dance required careful calculations on the part of the consultant; after all, being successful in the dance between privacy and publicity is in large part about “trying to let your desires be known—and prevail—without actually offending anyone” (Nippert-Eng 2010:263).

Frames are a product of our socialization and the social groups that we are a part of, and what constitutes the frame and its boundaries can shift over time as social norms, values, and technology changes. One of the most famous statements regarding the use of the pornographic frame—even when it is ambiguously defined—comes from The Supreme Court of the United States, when Justice Potter Stewart stated in 1964 that “I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description [of hard-core pornography]; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it...” (Gewirtz 1996:1024). Stewart’s statement that he might never be able to completely define the boundaries of the pornographic frame, yet would be immediately be able to apply the frame is echoed by Goffman’s (1974:21) argument that the fact that we are often unable to explain the origins or components of frameworks is no barrier to applying them. Given the shifts around sex and sexual norms and the “mainstreaming” of pornography into the culture that have occurred over the past several decades, what was recognizable to Stewart as pornographic in the 1960s may not be viewed as pornographic today (Sarracino and Scott 2008).
As Zerubavel argued (1991:11), “a frame is characterized not by its contents, but rather by the distinctive way in which it transforms the content’s meaning.” Applying the pornographic frame could change the most mundane objects and interactions into ones that could be regarded as erotic or pornographic. Marabel Morgan, author of *The Total Woman* (1973) is famously credited with suggesting that women greet their husbands after work wrapped in nothing but cellophane, transforming an everyday object into an erotic one. This re-framing technique was demonstrated by actress Kathy Bates in the film *Fried Green Tomatoes* in a scene that demonstrated the importance of social approval of our use of frames. After surprising her husband at the door in a dress made of cellophane, Evelyn’s husband admonished her, stating “Have you gone insane? Other people can see you! What if I’d been the paper boy or something?” Clearly, Evelyn and her husband disagree on the way she re-framed cellophane as an erotic object and on the level of privacy being employed in the situation.

In 2011, as I was concluding field work and observations, the erotic novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E.L. James and its sequels (which focus on a couple that enters into a dominant-submissive relationship) became best-sellers. The books were commonly called “Mommy porn” and were unexpectedly successful, topping best sellers lists in the United States and United Kingdom (Rophe 2012). Just as the book became incredibly popular, one of the largest sex toy party companies premiered a series of products based on the series; some of the products that were included were everyday, non-erotic products (i.e., men’s neckties, removable self-adhesive tape that is similar to athletic tape). These products, of course, can be purchased in a variety of locations that would not place them in a pornographic or erotic context. When a necktie occupies the men’s section in a department store or athletic tape a shelf in a pharmacy, it is non-erotic. By virtue of its inclusion in the pornographic frame—sold individually or in sets with handcuffs,
blindfolds, and nipple clamps, and in the context of a sex toy party—this everyday object takes on new meaning.

Another important way of understanding the influence that frames have on our interpretation of an object or situation is to consider what happens when an object moves from one frame to another. The history of the vibrator offers an interesting example of objects crossing back and forth between the pornographic and medical frames. Electromechanical vibrators were invented in the late nineteenth century as a treatment for hysteria in women (Maines 1999). Prior to the invention of electric versions, doctors manually stimulated patients to induce “hysterical paroxysm” or orgasm; the electromechanical vibrator was invented “in response to demand from physicians for more rapid and efficient physical therapies” (Maines 1999:3). How we understand an object or situation largely depends on the frame that we apply and the sociocultural context in which that frame is constructed. Doctors and patients in the late 1800s and early 1900s marked a clear boundary around the medical uses of the vibrator, which allowed it to be framed as a medical device, not an erotic object. Maines (1999:10) argued that when vibrators “began to appear in erotic films in the 1920s, the illusion of a clinical process distinct from sexuality and orgasm could not be sustained,” and vibrators disappeared from doctor’s offices. In other words, when another frame was applied, the boundary between the medical and pornographic uses of the vibrator collapsed and needed to be rebuilt; this rebuilding process removed the vibrator from the medical frame and placed it firmly inside the pornographic frame.

Similarly, objects can move from the pornographic frame into the medical frame; once that has occurred, objects previously regarded as obscene suddenly lose their pornographic quality. Again, Maines (1999:54) offered an example: the speculum, used in gynecological exams. Though it is regarded now as an object that is firmly within the medical/informational
frame, when it was invented the speculum was regarded as a “controversial” and potentially obscene object because of the possibility that it could have an “orgasmically stimulating effect” upon women. Stories were told of “women and girls lusting after medical examination and climaxing on the examining table the minute the speculum was inserted” (Maines 1999:58). Despite the fears surrounding its use, the speculum was eventually adopted by physicians, in large part to reduce the amount of time doctors spent physically touching women’s genitals. In this way, applying a different frame transformed what was viewed as a pornographic object into one that is a significant marker of the medical frame.

The consultants I interviewed and observed had very specific strategies for creating and employing the sex toy party frame. Given the elusive nature of frames, it should not be surprising that many of the consultants were often unable to clearly explain where the boundaries between the sex toy party frame, the medical/informational frame, and pornographic frame were, or why they were located where they were. In the following chapter, I describe key difference between the frames and explain a variety of techniques consultants used to construct and maintain the boundaries between the frames.

HIGH LEVELS OF ABSTRACTION: THE MEDICAL/INFORMATIONAL FRAME

The medical/informational frame, as it is applied to disclosures of private sexual behavior, often relates to women’s visits to their gynecologist or general practitioner. There is very little opportunity for adult women to attend a formal sex education class; most of the sex education that is taught to Americans occurs at young ages (Herbenick et al. 2009; Luker 2006). The education that is offered to adolescents varies widely across the country (in terms of the content that is taught and the accuracy of that content); moreover, the information that is taught to Americans when they are young may no longer be applicable as they age (Pappas 2011). The
result is “a ‘sexually illiterate population. . .[that does not] have basic information about their bodies, the bodies of their sexual partners, relationships, [and] sexual behaviors’” (Pappas 2011:1). After leaving school, one of the most reliable ways that Americans receive sexual health information is through the medical/informational frame.

The medical/informational frame is marked by several features that separate it from the sex toy party frame. First, the medical/informational frame is understood to be an impersonal encounter with an authority figure (the medical professional or sex educator) who may not ask relevant (and according to consultants, important) questions about sex pleasure or sexual health. The nurses and general practitioners surveyed by Gott et al. (2005:530) reported a variety of barriers to discussing sexual health issues with their patients, including the fear that they might open a “Pandora’s box” of issues that could not be adequately addressed because they “take up a long time and therefore are best avoided,” or that doctors might “transgress the public-private boundary and, potentially, offend the patient by ‘prying into something that’s none of [the doctor’s] business.’” Whether the patient was over age 40, a member of a racial/ethnicity minority group, identified as gay or lesbian, or was the same gender as the clinician could dramatically impact whether doctors discussed sexual health issues with their patients (Gott et al., 2005). Doctors were not the only ones concerned about causing offense or embarrassment: in 1999, more than two-thirds of Americans reported that they were concerned about bringing up sexual health issues with their physicians out of concern for embarrassment on the part of the physician, or because they worried that their doctors would be dismissive of their problem (Marwick 1999).

Doctors and educators are often clearly demarcated from the patients or students in appearance. Doctors wear hospital scrubs or white coats, while patients wear casual clothes (or a
cloth or paper gown); students might be wearing casual clothes while educators wear more formal attire. Very little personal information is known about the doctor (e.g., first name, marital status, number of children), whereas the doctor possesses quite a bit of this information about the patient. Doctors often rush through appointments, and the physical environment of the doctor’s office is not relaxing or comforting—instead, it is sterile and disinfected. Sex education curriculum, like most course materials, are often determined before the class begins, with little knowledge about the needs of the students, their base level of knowledge, or the questions that they might have. Classroom settings are often depersonalized as well, especially for college classrooms where classrooms are used by many teachers for a variety of subjects, and the presence at the front of the room clearly separates the educator from his/her students. These elements clearly mark the medical/informational frame, and discussions of sexuality and sexual practices that occur within this frame are deemed appropriate because they are associated with the frame.

*Elements of the Medical/Informational Frame: Physical Environment*

An essential element of the medical/informational frame is the physical environment in which discussions of sex and sexual behavior take place. When we apply the medical/informational frame, we use a common cultural framework of “the doctor’s office” or “the classroom.” Offices and clinical exam rooms are sterile and generally not “home-like.” There are very few “personal touches” in most doctors’ offices (save for the waiting room, in some cases). Even the physical environment of the waiting room is different from the examination rooms, where one comes into contact with the medical professionals. Waiting rooms usually do not have private space for patients to wait, there is often music or TV heard, and there are ample reading materials. Examination rooms, on the other hand, are usually sparsely
furnished (sometimes offering a chair for the doctor only), much quieter, and often windowless. This physical environment clearly demarcates the examination room from the waiting room, and we use the physical environment to inform our understanding of the situation. Most of us would not like to meet and speak to our doctors in the waiting room with other patients around—even though the waiting room is separated from the exam rooms by a short hallway—just as we may not want a TV or music playing during an examination. Because we are familiar with this frame, we are more comfortable discussing private sexual information behind the closed door of the examination room than we are at the reception desk when we check in for an appointment.

Classrooms and school environments use a similar cultural framework, although the factors that mark a “classroom” in our minds are different from those that mark a “doctor’s office.” Classrooms are usually organized in the same way: pupils face in one direction, with their attention focused on the teacher at the front. Teachers often dress differently from their students (often in business-casual attire), sometimes as a way to explicitly mark the difference between themselves and their students. Students often know little about the private lives of their teachers (sex educators included). Like doctors, teachers are closely associated with the professional space that they occupy; this is why young children are often surprised to see their teachers at the movie theater or the grocery store. In the student’s mind, the teacher has fused with the space that he/she occupied during the week, and it can be quite jarring to see that person so removed from that space. Similarly, it can often be quite a surprise to see one’s doctor at a restaurant or the hair salon.

There are few formal avenues for adults who want or need sexual education. There are a variety of books and videos available, but these educational resources (which vary in terms of accuracy and accessibility) do not allow the learner to ask questions or interact with an educator.
As mentioned earlier, patients and doctors reported discomfort bringing up sexual health matters, often to preserve the other from embarrassment (Gott et al., 2005; Hinchliff et al., 2004; Marwick, 1999). Because of this dearth of interactive educational opportunities, women often turn to their sex toy party consultants to gather information (Herbenick et al., 2009; Herbenick and Reece 2009). Consultants often told me that they were asked sexual health questions that they felt they could not answer (often about erectile dysfunction, painful intercourse, or side effects of medications). When consultants would tell guests that they were not comfortable answering medical questions and advised them to see their doctors, guests would often tell consultants that they did not want to ask their physicians, or that they were uneasy posing sexual health or pleasure questions to a doctor. Near the end of each interview, I asked the consultants why they thought guests were comfortable talking to them about sexual issues and their sexual practices but sometimes uncomfortable talking to their doctors. The sterile environment of the doctor’s office was often cited as a major reason why women were resistant to discussing private sexual matters with their health care providers. As Claire stated during our interview:

I think with [company name] consultants, you know, we’re in this private setting. . .and we’re talkin’ about something that most women, I would say, are intrigued by, and don’t get a chance to talk about, you know. In a doctor situation, you know, it is a pretty sterile environment and so in an area where, you know, you are able to relax, able to have a glass of wine and then are talking about something that you can not only use, but also benefit from, you know.

From Claire’s perspective—and the perspective of other consultants I interviewed—the physical environment of the party encouraged women to discuss private sexual information. Rather than holding parties in a sterile environment like a doctor’s office, or even an impersonal but not sterile space (i.e., a conference room or public meeting space), parties were held in private homes, usually in living rooms or family rooms. As Zerubavel (1991) noted, frames have the ability to transform the meaning of what is contained within them. By taking discussions of
sexual practices and sexual health out of the doctor’s office and into a living room, consultants transformed the meaning of those discussions from inappropriate to acceptable and to even encouraged.

*Elements of the Medical/Informational Frame: Separation from the Authority Figure*

When we apply the medical frame to discussions of private sexual information, we do not simply use the physical environment (i.e., waiting room chairs/examination tables, desks/chalkboards, etc.) to tell us “we are in a doctor’s office” or “we are in a classroom.” There are other markers that tell us what frame to apply, and those include the separation patients and students feel from their doctors and their teachers.

One important way that consultants encouraged guests to alter the medical/informational frame and apply the sex toy party frame was by presenting themselves as an informed friend, rather than an authority figure. Guests addressed consultants by their first names, and consultants usually called guests by their first names (or, because this research was done in the Southern United States, the honorific “Ms. [First Name],” such as “Ms. Amanda”). Unlike medical professionals, whose attire is often one of the key elements that defines the medical frame (hospital scrubs, lab coat, stethoscope around the neck, etc.), consultants’ attire was virtually the same as most of the guests. Consultants wore business casual attire that tended toward the more-casual (e.g., slacks rather than jeans, but never a pants suit); usually the only thing that separated them from the guests in terms of dress was a name tag or a company logo on their shirts. Unlike most medical/educational professionals, consultants discussed their personal lives in an attempt to connect with their guests; they also discussed their intimate relationships, children, and working conditions with guests. This attempt to connect with the guests by building a shared
identity is one of the features of the sex toy party frame that separated it from the medical/informational frame.

Another important element that distinguished the medical/informational frame from the sex toy party frame was the element of time and “feeling rushed.” Many of the consultants stated that one of the reasons guests were comfortable asking questions and advice of them was because they offered their guests their time. Doctors, they argued, rushed patients through their visits—or, at the very least, patients felt as if they were being rushed (a feeling that has been affirmed through interviews and surveys of patients; see Odgen, Bavalia, Bull, Frankum, Goldie, Gossau, Jones, Kumar, and Vasant 2004). During our interview, Amber discussed women’s perception that they were being rushed through their medical appointments, and how this impacted their desire to ask questions of their doctors. In addition, she discussed how the sex toy party frame changed this element; rather than rushing her customers, she allowed them as much time as they needed or would like:

Um, and as far as coming to me, like discussing things with me rather than their doctor. I feel like a lot of times women go to the doctor, whether it’s a female doctor or a male doctor. . . . I feel like when women go to the doctor, like usually it’s always a very rushed type of visit, you know. At least from my experiences, and so I feel like women may be, “Oh, my gosh, you know, she’s not gonna have time to answer my questions, she’s gotta, you know, move on to the next patient.” Whereas I am like, I’m setting time for them, like “I’m here as long as it takes for me to answer your questions and recommend the right things for you.” Um, I feel like they have more support at our parties, you know, than maybe at a doctor’s office. I feel like a lot of doctors don’t come across as warm and welcoming, you know, as we do.

By expressing to her customers that she is “here as long as it takes” to answer their questions, Amber significantly shifted the sex toy party frame away from the medical/informational frame. This approach also helped to reduce the authority and power that she had in relation to the guests. As Schwartz (1974) noted, those with power are the least likely to be made to wait for an appointment. This idea can be extended to the notion of “being
rushed." Doctors (who determine the schedule, order of the patients, hours they are willing to work, and how many patients they will see in a day) “over-schedule” their clinic hours so they always have patients to see; the result is that not only are the relatively powerless patients left to wait, but they are rushed through their appointments. Powerful people—in this case, doctors—are able to make people wait or hurry them along by virtue of their control over the environment, which in turn impacts an individuals’ satisfaction with their doctor. Odgen et al. (2005) found that despite the fact they underestimated the amount of time spent with their physicians, patients still preferred to spend more time with their doctors. Moreover, the desire to spend more time with their doctor was inversely related to both the emotional satisfaction patients felt after their appointment and with the likelihood that patients would comply with the doctors’ recommendation (Ogden et al., 2005). By not rushing their guests through the ordering process, the consultants are emphasizing the guests’ emotional needs in a way that physicians tend not to (Odgen et al., 2005). Teachers wield the same control over time and timing that doctors have; teachers determine the lesson plan or daily curriculum; they determine if there will be time for questions and if those questions will be answered. In addition, students (especially those in primary and secondary school settings) have little power to alter the curriculum.

Amber also illustrated one of the important elements of building comfort and using the sex toy party frame rather than the medical/informational frame at parties; guests, she said, feel like they have more support than during a visit to the doctor. This is due in large part to the work that consultants do to establish rapport and comfort with their guests through telling their story and building a sense of shared identity. Consultants offered a lot of personal information about themselves during parties: they told guests about their entrance into the business, their home lives, their dissatisfaction with other employment, and sometimes their own sexual difficulties.
Sharing this information allowed for a clear demarcation of the sex toy party frame from the medical/informational frame. When applying the medical frame, the personal information one might want about a doctor—personal background, for example—was deemed irrelevant, despite the fact that the doctor knows much of this information about the patient. Consultants actively worked to help guests remove the medical/informational frame from discussions of private sexual behavior and apply the sex toy party frame, with establishing rapport and connection being an essential element of that process.

During our interview, Kendra discussed why she believed guests were reluctant to discuss sexual matters with their physicians, and one of the key points that she raised was the separation of the medical professional from the patient:

So I mean I just feel like there’s so much education out there that women don’t get and they don’t feel comfortable ‘cause in a doctor’s office, number one, they’re rushed. And then number two, it’s an intimidating situation, because the person across from them is so much smarter than them and they seem like they shouldn’t ask questions.

Kendra’s statement points to another element of the medical frame that distinguishes it from the sex toy party frame: the educational attainment differences between doctors and patients. Having cited doctors and patients as an example, Schwartz (1968:743) noted that we often confer “extreme rank. . .upon those for whom privacy shields are voluntarily removed.” Doctors, who are clearly an authority figure when one is inside a medical office, also have the added authority that comes from years of medical training (something that most of their patients lack). Consultants, on the other hand, did not emphasize any higher education that they have received; if anything, they played down their education in an attempt to be approachable. In addition, downplaying educational differences between themselves and guests allowed the consultants to present the business as a viable money-making opportunity for those without college degrees.
This impersonal relationship with doctors—wherein patients know little about their physicians’ personal lives—persisted despite the fact that some of these medical relationships could last over many years. Similarly, teachers often have a relatively impersonal relationship with their students; they may know a lot about the students, but the students (generally) do not know much about the teachers’ private lives. And, unlike the ongoing relationship with doctors, students usually have a new teacher every year; though they see each other for many hours over that time, the nature of American schooling does not usually allow for the development of a long-term educational relationship.

When I asked Laney why she thought her guests were comfortable discussing sex with her, but they might be reluctant to talk to their doctors, she hypothesized that the on-going relationship with doctors—and doctors’ relationships with other members of her family—might prevent customers from discussing sexual issues.

They may not see me ever again. You know, so I think that’s a lot of it, it’s ‘cuz I’m a stranger. You know, your doctor probably, you know, helps you give birth, knows your husband, knows your kids, knows a family member, you know, maybe your mom went to the same doctor. So I think because I’m a stranger that they may not encounter again, they feel more familiar with me.

Though speculative, Laney’s point—that the guests may be comfortable discussing private sexual information with a consultant simply because they may never have to see them again—was reiterated by several others with whom I spoke.

Jackie: You know they just, I think they. . .their fear, there’s always a fear of being judged, even by their friends and family. And they don’t know me. I’m not going to be going to their house next week. I’m not going to be having coffee with their girlfriends. So they’re not afraid that, “Oh, this woman is gonna go tell everyone my business.”

From the consultants’ perspective, the fact that guests would not have to interact with the consultants again—unless they chose to—might have allowed the guests to get the information
they sought without the social ramifications and stigma that might occur if the consultant responded negatively to the question and the guest had to interact with the consultant again.

From the consultants’ perspective, the fact that they tried to answer questions in a non-judgmental way was one of the most important reasons that guests were comfortable asking them questions. Herbenick, Reece and Hollub’s (2009:324) found that “women [were] particularly sensitive to, and attuned to, those facilitators who they perceive[d] to be open-minded or less judgmental about sexuality,” supported by the finding that consultants who scored higher on sexual opinion measures were more likely to be asked questions about taboo sexual activities (e.g., masturbation, same-sex sexuality, and anal sex). As Laney mentioned in her interview, guests believe that consultants have “heard it all,” and the consultants tried their best to make the guest feel that their concerns and issues regarding sexuality were valid; indeed, that those issues were “common” and the guest was “normal.”

They really tell me lots of personal stuff and I always try to make them feel at ease, you know, not strange or abnormal. I always, even if it’s something I’ve never heard before, “You know, I get that from a lot of women,” so they feel normal. Because that’s what a lot of it is, is “We just want to feel the same, we don’t want to feel different.” So I just kind of try to make them feel comfortable and help them the best way I can.

Because consultants see guests in a relaxed setting, they are better able to develop a connection and relationship with the guests. This connection is something that consultants believed was lacking in guests’ relationships with their health care professionals, and it allowed the guests to reveal private sexual information in a comfortable setting with a non-judgmental, sympathetic listener. The fact that guests were unlikely to discuss sexuality-related issues with their health care providers is supported by existing literature on questions and disclosures asked of sex toy party consultants. Herbenick and Reece (2009) found that over half of the sex toy
party consultants they surveyed reported that a guest at their most recent party told mentioned that the party was one of the first times she had discussed sexuality issues with anyone.

Despite the fact that the guests might have felt anonymous when discussing their sexual practices or difficulties with the consultant, those discussions were not anonymous in the strictest sense of the term. One of the few elements of the medical/informational frame that was appropriated for the sex toy party frame was the notion of confidentiality: the information that was revealed during the ordering room would not be shared with anyone else. During their parties and during our interviews, consultants universally assured the guests (and told me) that any discussions in the ordering room would remain confidential. Though they did not make the association to the confidentiality of a doctor’s examination room or medical records (they were more likely to make the comparison to the famous advertising campaign about Las Vegas: “What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas”), they assured guests that discussions in the ordering room and the products ordered would remain between themselves and the guests. Even when other guests would ask the consultant what their friends had ordered, the consultants would always refuse to answer; I never saw a consultant violate their customers’ confidentiality.

Elements of the Medical Frame: Asking Relevant Questions

One of the most common problems with the medical/informational frame, according to consultants (learned through their interactions with guests and their corporate training), was that doctors did not ask patients relevant questions about their sexual pleasure, sexual difficulty, or even their sexual practices. Previous research has indicated that doctors were often undereducated and uncomfortable discussing sexual health with older adults, gay men and lesbians, racial/ethnic minorities, or patients who were not the same gender as the doctor (Gott et al., 2004; Hinchliff, Gott, and Galena 2005). As noted earlier, doctors often feared they might
open a “Pandora’s box” of issues that could not be adequately addressed because they “take up a long time and therefore are best avoided,” or that doctors might “transgress the public-private boundary and, potentially, offend the patient by ‘prying into something that’s none of [the doctor’s] business’” (Gott et al., 2005:530). This feeling of embarrassment seems to go both ways in the doctor-patient relationship; large portions of Americans reported that they were concerned about bringing up sexual health issues with their physicians out of concern it would embarrass their physician, or because they worried that their doctors would be dismissive of their problem (Marwick 1999). Consultants are made aware of this gap in the medical frame through their own experiences and through company training. Several consultants told me that during their corporate training, trainers and other consultants told them that medical students spend very little time learning about sexual health and pleasure. Joy spoke about this during our interview when she discussed her decision to become a consultant:

I guess it kinda struck a chord with me, but I knew that I loved the products, I knew how they helped my relationship with my significant other and I wanted, I wanted to help somebody, because there just isn’t enough information for women out there. And doctors! I’ve never had a doctor ask me “How’s your sex life?” Never! So it’s really sad, because it should be part of their training. And further researching that, I found that they only get like, doctors, gynecologists only get like 14 hours of sexual, you know, health benefit from, you know. They don’t get much training for that and I think that’s sad, because it is a huge part of our lives, a huge part of your relationship.

Marie discussed this as well. During our interview she stated that she was concerned that doctors were also embarrassed to ask their patients important questions about sexual health:

So in a lot of cases I don’t want to say. . .I have no medical degree, so I don’t want to say that I know more, but in a lot of cases doctors don’t know either. And because they don’t know, they don’t want to bring it up, ‘cuz they don’t want to look silly or maybe they’re embarrassed. Like, you know, “I’ll be glad to fix your broken leg or, you know, get you some eyeglasses, but don’t talk to me about that” (laugh).

From the consultants’ perspectives, doctors did their patients a disservice by not asking explicit questions about their sex lives. In their attempts to “fix the problem,” they ignored other
important aspects of human sexuality—issue that patients might be too embarrassed to bring up with their doctors. In contrast, consultants often asked guests detailed questions in the ordering room to make sure that the product they were purchasing was right for them and that they would be satisfied with their purchase. For example, consultants regularly asked guests who were buying toys what kind of stimulation they liked (i.e., clitoral or vaginal); and, when it came to ordering arousal creams, whether they had used a similar product before. Several times I witnessed consultants talking guests out of making a purchase if, based on the guests’ answers, the consultant did not think the product would help the guest (e.g., recommending one bottle of multi-purpose lubricant rather than two bottles of different lubricant, or recommending a smaller toy with fewer “bells and whistles” if a guest had never used one before). Based on both my observations and consultants’ reports, guests rarely seemed reluctant to answer these questions, because they were presented as being relevant to the guests’ purchases. Examples of both of these types of questions occurred at Kendra’s party, as I noted in my field notes:

One of the guests entered the ordering room and wanted to purchase a male masturbation sleeve. Kendra asked the guest whether her partner was “well endowed.” The guest hesitated before answering, and Kendra told her that her answer would help Kendra make a product recommendation. If the guest wanted the sleeve because oral sex was uncomfortable and she wanted to use the sleeve as “buffer,” she would recommend a specific version; if the guest simply wanted the sleeve to enhance regular sexual activity rather than to remedy a sexual issue, Kendra would recommend a different version of the sleeve. I noted my field notes that the guest offered a non-committal answer (“He’s bigger than average”) rather than an actual measurement, and the guest says that she does occasionally have problems performing oral sex. The guest had also selected a lubricant and an arousal cream to purchase, and Kendra recommended that instead of purchasing two products, she purchase one product that served as both a lubricant and an arousal cream.

Within the context of the sex toy party frame and with the justification she offered for asking, Kendra’s question was not regarded as an invasion of privacy, though in a different context it would likely be regarded as highly inappropriate. The guests’ answer (“He’s bigger
than average”) is also an example of staying within the sex toy party frame; it answered Kendra’s question without providing too much concrete information about her partner’s penis size, and answered the question without using graphic or slang terms.

LOW LEVELS OF ABSTRACTION: THE PORNOGRAPHIC FRAME

The pornographic frame was the frame that consultants confronted the most often when they began their parties. Marked by lascivious discussions of sexual practices, the pornographic frame evokes the act of sex more than any other frame. One of the factors that marks pornographic from non-pornographic discussions of sexuality is the use of slang terms rather than anatomically correct ones. The pornographic frame also often means disclosure of extremely private information in a manner that is explicit and exhibitionistic, rather than informational. In addition, the pornographic frame is marked by less-obvious signs, such as body language and gestures (for example, not mimicking sex acts during the demonstration). Even things as simplistic as the way consultants demonstrated products (at chest-level rather than hip-level) could change the frame that was applied.

As most of the consultants told me, the pornographic frame was the one that guests most often expected to be employed during a sex toy party; they expected the demonstration to be “raunchy” and that they would be coerced into revealing private sexual information. Chalese discussed this during her interview, when she said that she often got positive feedback from guests regarding their preconceived notions about the party:

I honestly think a lot of women come thinking, “I’m gonna have to tell her, ‘don’t touch me. . . .’” Because a lot of them, a lot of ‘em are always in the party saying, “I really thought this was gonna be raunchy, but you did a very good job of keepin’ it classy and educational.” And I think that’s what sets [company name] apart from everybody else. Like, [company name] is extra classy. . .but, at the same time, we can show you how to be nasty, you know what I’m sayin’? So, I think a lot of people come with the expectation that it’s gonna be really raunchy, and leave with a different view. . .you know, thinking “This is gonna be ok.”
From Chalese’s perspective, her guests approached the party believing that the pornographic frame would be applied, and the pornographic frame made them apprehensive about attending the party at all. They were so surprised that the party was not raunchy—that it was educational—and they felt the need to comment to her after the party was over. Tavia elaborated on this notion during her interview, when she told me why she chose to join one company over another: “Like there’s nothing wrong with being freaky and wanting to be sexually active and stuff like that, but your products don’t have to be raunchy. It’s the classy way of how you can do things.”

Tavia’s interview illustrated the importance of cultural frames. There are so few frames that are used to discuss sex—and the pornographic frame is an extremely common and powerful one—that it is easy to believe that there is but one frame to use. Tavia chose the company she worked for because consultants were able to be classy—to employ the sex toy party frame—rather than only employing the pornographic frame. Ria discussed the dominance of the pornographic frame during our interview when she lamented that, in her opinion, guests sometimes defaulted to the extreme frames to discuss and enact sexuality. From her perspective, women did not realize that there were multiple (and more moderate) frames that could be applied: “It’s so over the top. There’s no, there’s no middle. It’s, it’s this way or this way and no in between.” Chalese’s quote illustrated this as well; when she stated that “we can show you how to be nasty,” she argued that she can show guests how to employ the pornographic frame and “be nasty,” but that there were other frames that could be applied. Alicia showed this ability to change frames during our interview when she said “I always try to use the proper terminology for things. You know, it’s always the ‘vagina.’ Do I call it the vagina in real life? No (laughs).” In her “real life,” Alicia might have employed a variety of frames to discuss private sexual
information—perhaps even the pornographic frame, depending on the situation—but at sex toy parties she believed that the sex toy party frame (including the use of anatomically correct language) was most appropriate.

*Elements of the Pornographic Frame: Explicit Language*

One of the most essential ways that consultants distinguished the sex toy party frame from the pornographic frame is the language that they used. During their interviews, most consultants told me that they intentionally used anatomically correct terms for body parts rather than slang terms, though they did occasionally use euphemisms to describe sex acts and/or body parts. For example, Candace described her use of anatomical language, and how euphemisms could be used to joke or to loosen up the group:

I mean, sometimes you’ll joke and you’ll, you know, people call [the vagina] the va-jay-jay or whatever, but, most of the time I say clitoral. I don’t say “clit,” it’s “clitoris,” you know. I try to explain, we’re adult women, we can handle adult women words. I say penis, I say vagina, I say masturbate, I say, you know, oral favors. . .I try to keep it classy.

Candace, like most of the consultants I observed, did use anatomically correct terms, but typically to discuss body parts. Some consultants said that euphemisms for body parts were often confusing for guests. Euphemisms changed, become outdated, or were generationally or subculture specific; the fear was that guests would not know what the consultant was referring to (e.g., that the phrase “the man in the boat” refers to the clitoris). At most of the parties I observed, anatomically correct terms were used, but they were often not specific. So, for example, a woman’s entire genital region was referred to as the vagina (except to highlight the clitoris as a separate organ), despite the fact that women’s genitals are comprised of a variety of different parts. Men’s sexual organs were often referred to as the penis (and the euphemism “the boys” for the testicles), despite the different anatomical structures that comprise men’s genitals.
Consultants told me that they viewed part of their goal as a consultant to educate their guests, and they would not be respected as educators if they used euphemisms for body parts.

Many sex acts (especially those that might be regarded as taboo, like oral and anal sex) were also referred to using euphemisms. Oral sex was commonly referred to as “oral favors,” and anal sex was almost universally referred to using terms like “the back door” or “playing the back nine.” These euphemisms occurred in a specific context, though, so the connection between the euphemism and the product or behavior that was being discussed was usually clear. These euphemisms not only supplied a little humor, but they were mild terms that helped to remove some of the stigma from the practices. It is likely that many guests would not have recognized the terms fellatio and cunnilingus, and other terms like “eating out” or “blow jobs” might have been regarded as offensive by some guests. In line with their emphasis on education, consultants used anatomically correct terms for body part in order to educate guests; in addition, it seemed that consultants believed if they used euphemisms for body parts, their educational focus would be undermined.

The use of euphemisms in conjunction with anatomically correct words (rather than slang terms) also allowed consultants to build comfort with guests. Despite the fact that they were anatomically accurate, words like “vagina” made some guests uncomfortable. Carolyn discussed this at length during our interview, and how the use of euphemisms was a way to make some guests more comfortable:

Carolyn: And it’s all in what you say, too, you know. You use the term “doorbell,” “back door,” “front door,” that kind of stuff. I mean if you’re gonna say “fuck” and that kind of stuff, I mean, you’re gonna get that kind of language back. If you’re, you know, what you use, you know. . .

Interviewer: Right, ‘cuz you’re guiding them. You’re guiding them, and if you use, you know, vulgar terms, then they’re gonna use vulgar terms.
Carolyn: I always, like I try to keep my, all my terminology as clinical or as, you know, like I said, as “the back door,” the “front door.”

Interviewer: Euphemisms, yeah.

Carolyn: Versus any...because there are people that won’t say the word “vagina” in front of them. They’re gonna freak out, “Oh, my god, you just said ‘penis!’”...This is a sex toy party, you know.

Interviewer: That’s what it’s called.

Carolyn: That just, that phrase makes them uncomfortable, so if you use a word that’s associated with it, but isn’t vulgar or inappropriate, people are, then they’re just like, “Oh, well, ok,” and it makes them much more comfortable, because you’re not gonna be up there saying that word that they, you know, [their] mom said, “I don’t even want to hear come out of your mouth.” And they say that, you know? So it just makes things a little bit easier for people when they hear stuff like that, and then they know, too, that, you know, they can discuss certain things and not feel like they have to say words that they’re not comfortable hearing. They don’t want to have to use them as well.

Building comfort for guests was an important part of the consultants’ job, and the common belief among consultants was that one of the easiest ways to make people uncomfortable (and to potentially lose customers) was to use vulgar slang terms. Of course, as Carolyn mentioned, what “counts” as vulgar was also informed by and dependent on the social groups to which we belong and the socialization we have undergone. Kapsalis (1997:73) argued that doctors are taught language that serves to shift a gynecological examination—which might be regarded as a pornographic occasion, given the exposure of genitals—away from the pornographic frame and into the medical frame:

They are taught to use words that are less sexually connotative or awkward. For example, “I am going to examine your breasts now” as opposed to “I’m going to feel your breasts now.” A number of script adjustments are made: “insert” or “place” the speculum as opposed to “stick in”; “healthy and normal” as opposed to “looks great” [emphasis in original].

The fact that doctors are taught how to help create and enforce frame boundaries through the use of carefully selected words indicates the importance of language in boundary
construction and maintenance. The beginning portion of the excerpt from Carolyn’s interview illustrated another important point: the consultants were guiding their guests in the deployment of the sex toy party frame, and essential to that process was the consultants’ modeling the frame for guests. If consultants used slang terms for body parts (“dick” rather than “penis,” “clit” rather than “clitoris”) or sex acts (“fuck” instead of “sex” or “blow job” instead of “oral sex”), the consultants believed that some guests would be uncomfortable.

Another consequence of using potentially offensive slang terms (like “dick”) was that other guests might feel that the consultants’ use of those words gave free license for them to use terms that were regarded as vulgar and inappropriate in the context of the sex toy party. As Carolyn mentioned at the end of the excerpt, guests tended to use the language that the consultants used (or at least felt pressure to use the same language); the use of slang terms might imply to other guests that they were the only acceptable type of language used during the sex toy party frame. This did not completely prevent guests from using slang terms, but even when guests used slang terms during the party (e.g., asking the consultant a question but using the slang term instead of the correct one), the consultant rarely directly corrected guests; instead, the consultant continued to use anatomically correct language, with the hope of guiding guests back to the sex toy party frame. Jackie demonstrated this during her interview, when she said, “I try to use, I’m using a proper term, so it kind of, tries to gear them out of it, joking always, but they’re [the hostesses’] friends. I can’t shut her up, I mean I’m not gonna say, ‘Could you please not [say that]. . .’” Jackie’s comment reflected what I observed at the parties. In almost all cases, consultants maintained the use of the sex toy party frame with regards to the language that they used, even when the guests were unable or unwilling to alter their behavior to fit the new frame.
Elements of the Pornographic Frame: Controlling Bodily Gestures

One of the important ways that the sex toy party frame is different from the pornographic frame is the level of “personalness” that was employed when using the sex toy party frame. The pornographic frame is marked by the use of the body in ways that are recognized by members of the dominant culture to be erotic or lewd; this might include acting out or mimicking sexual practices, or making sexually explicit gestures. Because they were trying to deter guests from applying the pornographic frame, consultants were acutely aware of their body language and the way they used their bodies during demonstrations, working to avoid any gestures that seemed explicit or raunchy. They also worked to control the gestures of the audience; in particular, by prohibiting guests from testing or sampling some products.

When doing their demonstrations, almost all of the consultants I observed held their products at chest level, and rarely mimed sexual acts during their demonstrations. This seemed like a minor detail; perhaps something consultants had unconsciously picked up at trainings, and at first I did not even notice the consistency between consultants. But during our interview, Emma mentioned that she had a specific reason for demonstrating things at chest-level rather than hip- or waist-level:

Whenever I actually like do toys and stuff, if I’m showing exactly which way a toy faces, like a G spot toy, I will not hold it anywhere near my crotch. I will hold it up more towards my stomach or my breasts, because I don’t want them to get a visual of where the toy goes on me. I just want to show them exactly where it faces, but I don’t want them to get a visual. To me, I don’t want to. . .that’s just not my style. I don’t want to be raunchy.

In Emma’s opinion, holding the products at chest-level allowed for a level of abstraction that would be difficult if she held the products below her waist and gave the guests a “visual” of her using the toy. Doing otherwise is “raunchy,” according to her, because it employed the pornographic frame rather than the sex toy party frame. And, because she was the guide during
the party, demonstrating how to implement the frame, she needed to constantly guard against failures or disruptions of the frame.

One of the most important distinctions between the pornographic frame and the sex toy party frame was the contrasting ideas of abstraction or personalness of the disclosures. When the pornographic frame was employed, sex was evoked in a literal way; the pornographic frame encouraged the user to place herself “in the action” and to create mental imagery of engaging in the behavior themselves. This extended to preventing the guests from thinking about consultants in a sexual way, specifically by not discussing their sexual experiences or the products that they have used or own. Many of the consultants told me that to do so would cause the guests to imagine them (the consultants) using the products. During our interviews, most of the consultants said that the reason they elected not to talk about their personal sexual use of the products during the parties—even when guests explicitly asked them—was to avoid giving guests the “visual” of them using the toy(s). During our interviews, consultants relayed second-hand stories from guests about consultants who over-disclosed. Though these stories might be viewed as rumor, they served to educate consultants and reinforced the boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate levels of disclosure:

Kimberly: I mean they want to picture themselves. And so, you know I’ve had, I’ve had some of my customers tell me that, “Oh, my gosh, you work so much better, the last girl, you know, that did our party or whatever, she was just like ‘Oh, yeah, and then I use this, and then I use that and then I use this.’” It was like “Who wants to purchase anything from that person?” Because I’m already grossed out, ‘cuz it’s like, “Oh, gosh, you use all this stuff?” But you’re just like “Ok, well. all right. now I can only have you using this stuff in my head right now.” So, yeah. . .

*   *   *

Joy: Because I think I don’t want to plant that image in someone else’s head. I want them to think about them and their partner, not me and my partner. That’s gross, do you know what I’m saying?....And my feedback I’ve gotten from my parties where women have heard personal stories [at other consultants’ parties], they go, “Oh gosh, she was just
nasty, and like, oh, you know, we did this and this.” And I’m like “Really? Who wants that image?” You know what I’m sayin’? And I’ve gotten a lot of negative feedback from that, so that’s one of the reasons I don’t get into anything personal.

As these quotes from interviews demonstrate, consultants often actively avoided giving their customers a visual of them using the products. These consultants noted, too, that once the visual was in their guests’ heads, it was difficult to remove, negatively impacting their presentation of self. Guests were often uncomfortable with this type of disclosure, according to the consultants, and perhaps also got a negative impression of the company. This potential damage to the presentation of self might also explain why guests were comfortable revealing sexual information to their consultant but not to doctors. If a guest disclosed information to the consultant that damaged her presentation of self (if she created a situation in which the consultant could “never look at her the same way again”), she could choose to never see the consultant again. Guests might have even approached the party from this perspective: a chance to get information or to tell someone information that might damage their presentation of self without the negative repercussions.

The vast majority of the consultants I observed extended this management of their physical bodies, the prevention of “mental images,” and their presentation of self to other parts of the demonstration. Very few of the consultants mimicked or acted out sexual scenarios or behaviors during the party. When there were graphic demonstrations, my field notes reflected my surprise:

When demonstrating the warming lubricant, Carolyn gave each guest a little sample of the product to rub on their arms. She said that when it’s rubbed, it will heat up, which adds to the heat from friction during intercourse. She warned that we needed to be careful about this—“You want hot sex, not burning sex”—but that the benefit of the warming cream is that “He’ll think it’s all him.” As she said this, she made a vigorous humping motion.
When I got home from that party and was taking field notes, I noted that “this is the first time I’ve seen something like this at a party—a little more graphic and explicit than the others.” At Kendra’s party, she also engaged in similar “acting out” of sex. When she demonstrated a dildo with a suction-cup base (which is often demonstrated by sticking it to the TV, the window, the wall, or the coffee table which allows the consultant to joke about how it can be used anywhere), Kendra stuck it to the wall behind her, bending over and mimicking a backwards humping motion as if she was going to use it.

The occasions in which consultants acted out sex were few and far between, but even in those instances where the consultants did mimic a sexual practice (which usually occurred when they were demonstrating the male masturbation sleeves on a dildo, or showing guests how to use a c-ring on a dildo), the demonstrations didn’t feel graphic or explicit. None of the products I saw demonstrated (and even those that were not demonstrated in person but were shown in the catalogs) were flesh-toned. Every sex toy is brightly colored, and come in a variety of colors, but nothing even close to flesh-toned was marketed or sold. This fact might have helped consultants develop the sex toy frame and helped guests to implement it; the products do not look explicitly sexual. Many of the toys, in fact, are phallic in shape only; they do not resemble male genitalia much at all. Combined with the fact that many of the “mild” products were discussed as useful for non-erotic purposes (e.g., numbing lubricants that could be used before a waxing appointment; see Chapter Five for additional examples) may help to shift guests away from the pornographic frame and toward the sex toy party frame.

While the consultants demonstrate the products, even the word “demonstration” is a bit factitious. Consultants usually allow the guests to try a variety of the products (e.g., body sprays, massage creams, and lubricants), and some of these demonstrations are interactive. But as the
products become more erotic and have fewer non-erotic uses, the interactive portion of the party basically ends. There are some products—arousal creams and toys—that the guests are usually expressly prohibited from “trying out.” Obviously, allowing the guests to try the toys would be unsanitary, but it was sometimes hard for the guests to understand why they could not try the arousal creams (by going into the bathroom and applying it to the clitoris). During Melinda’s party, she explained why she could not allow this:

Melinda had just started explaining the purpose of arousal creams; specifically, that men are easily aroused—“the wind blows and the sails are up”—but it takes women “a hurricane, a tsunami, and a tornado to get going.” She says that unfortunately, the guests are not allowed to try out the arousal creams. Melinda says that she does not have a problem with it because she wants her customers to be satisfied with their purchases, but that there are issues of sanitation and product safety if they were allowed to try it. Even worse, she said, is that her guests would be frustrated because they would want to rush home and would not be able to get there fast enough! (The guests laugh).

Usually, the guests accepted the consultants’ explanation for why they would not be allowed to try specific products; in fact, it was very rare for a guest to ask to sample something that the consultant had not begun to demonstrate. Consultants clearly took the lead in building the sex toy party frame and, once established, guests often seemed unwilling to challenge it (or, had little desire to challenge it). In this way, consultants attempted to manage the bodily gestures and movements of their guests to prevent them from applying the pornographic frame (i.e., becoming sexually stimulated after trying out the arousal creams) and instead keep the sex toy party frame in place.

Another way of encouraging guests to employ the sex toy party frame rather than the pornographic frame was through the consultants’ choice of games. There were three overall classifications of games: purposive games, non-purposive games, and games with a hidden purpose (see Chapter Five). Most of the consultants told me that they only played purposive games, in large part because those games helped them to build their business by helping them to
recruit new consultants or hostesses, thereby expanding their clientele. This was confirmed during my observations of their parties. Most of the purposive games and games with a hidden purpose were relatively “mild,” perhaps having a slightly sexual name (“Pop My Cherry” or “The Lei Game”) but with very little sexual content (see Chapter Five). Non-purposive games, on the other hand, could be decidedly sexual in nature, and sometimes crossed the boundary from the sex toy party frame to the pornographic frame.

One non-purposive game (employed by a few consultants) was called “The Lap Game,” a kind of musical-chairs and “Have you ever?” hybrid. After introducing herself, the consultant explains that she is going to read a list of sex-related yes/no questions. If someone at the party can answer yes, they should move one seat to their right; if they have not engaged in the activity in the question, they should remain seated. Guests regularly end up seated on each other’s laps as some women move around the room and others do not. The person who makes it back to their original seat first wins a small prize. The questions can range from relatively mild (“did you get a kiss before you came here tonight,” “does your husband or boyfriend know where you are tonight,” or “are you wearing lace right now?”) to the more sexually explicit (“have you ever had sex in your parents’ home,” “have you ever made a pornographic film,” or “have you ever cheated on your partner with another woman?”). This game was not very common during the parties I observed; I only saw it played once. In that instance, the questions started out relatively mild (“are you wearing red lingerie?”) and ended with the more explicit questions listed above. In interviews, other consultants told me that they did play this game often, but that they kept the questions strictly “mild.” Of course, “mildness” is in the eye of the beholder, and even the mildest of questions could cause discomfort among some guests.
The other non-purposive game that nearly all of the consultants discussed in their interviews (but that I never observed at a party) was commonly called “The Double-Header Game.” In this game, the consultant brings a double-ended dildo to the party to use as a prop for this game. The guests are instructed to pass the dildo from one person to the next (like Hot Potato), but they are only allowed to pass it using their legs/knees (or, alternatively, guests were told they could use any body part to pass it except for their hands, so they might use their necks/shoulders, elbows, or forearms). The guests pass the toy around and if a guest dropped it they were “out,” with the last remaining guest receiving a small prize at the end of the game.

During interviews, consultants often told me these non-purposive games (especially The Double-Header game) were particularly problematic, because they could cause the guests to become uncomfortable. Storr’s (2003) study of sex toy parties offered a potential explanation for this discomfort. According to her analysis, part of the bonding that occurred between guests at sex toy parties relied on pushing the boundaries between female homosociality and lesbianism. In her study, guests were sometimes asked to play games that directly relied on lesbian imagery (e.g., replicating performing oral sex on another woman by eating dessert from between another guest’s knees). Storr (2003:78) describes situations in which guests sometimes reacted with aggressive lesbophobia when asked to play these games; for these guests, the games crossed the boundary and “were too lesbian to be funny.” I never witnessed an “eruption of lesbophobia” as Storr (2003:79) described. I never saw a game like this played at any of the parties I observed, nor did any of the consultants I interviewed mention having played games like this in the past; I also never saw The Double-Header Game played.

Though Storr (2003) argued that games like The Double-Header game were acceptable to guests at the parties she observed because they replicated heterosexual sex (e.g., one of the
women pretended to be a man by “inserting” the dildo and the other played the female role by “receiving” the dildo). It is possible that Storr’s analysis can be extended by applying the concepts of the sex toy party and pornographic frames. Rather than electing not to play these games because of homophobia on the part of guests, it is possible that consultants in my study chose not to play these types of games because they strayed too far into the pornographic frame. One of the characteristics of the pornographic frame involved the imitation or replication of sex acts during the party, and The Double-Header Game and games like the one Storr (2003) described certainly relied on concrete and graphic sexual imagery. Games like The Lap Game described above required that guests either reveal information about themselves or refuse to play the game, perhaps marking those guests who refused to play as “spoil sports” or as uptight. From the consultants’ perspective, playing these games might create such discomfort among guests that they were unwilling to participate in the party or purchase products from the consultant.

Consultants’ desire not to play The Lap Game related to the next element of the pornographic frame: controlling private disclosures. Once The Lap Game had begun and guests started to reveal information, that information could not be “un-disclosed,” and there is no way to “opt-out” of questions if guests found them too invasive. For example, during the party I observed where this game was played, the consultant asked guests to move one seat if they “had ever had sex with an ex’s brother.” If a guest refused to answer this question and did not move seats, they were in effect answering the question. This type of game might have encouraged guests to reveal more private information than they were comfortable doing; again, this could have caused discomfort and created negative consequences (interpersonal and financial) for the consultant.
Elements of the Pornographic Frame: Controlling Private Disclosures

One of the most important things that consultants demonstrated to their guests concerned the timeliness and appropriateness of disclosures. Poorly timed or inappropriate disclosures of private information (from a guest or a consultant) could disrupt the construction and maintenance of the sex toy party frame. Most of the consultants that I interviewed stated that they never revealed private sexual information to their guests, though my observations indicated that many of them violated this principle (in ways both large and small). Controlling disclosures of private information was viewed by consultants as both important and almost entirely outside of their control, because consultants did not believe that they could control the behavior of adult women.

Faced with the stereotype that sex toy parties were raunchy or overly sexualized, consultants attempted to maintain an image of “classiness.” Several consultants told me they had encountered situations where one guest over-disclosed private sexual information or behaved in an explicitly sexual way. Situations like that, consultants said, could negatively impact their sales, the guests’ opinion about the consultant, and/or their opinions about the company in general. Claire addressed this during our interview by offering an example of a situation in which she worried that other guests were uncomfortable because of one guest’s behavior.

Claire: In the field, when you’re selling stuff, you know and people can bring in their... you know, you can’t, sometimes you can’t control grown women. And so you have to, you have to premise, “We’re gonna demonstrate items on appropriate parts of the body. That means hand. . .”

Interviewer: Arm, leg, lower leg, yeah.

Claire: Exactly. And so, you know, everybody wants to show their tramp stamp (laugh). And so I, she goes, “I have one on my belly,” you know, a tattoo, and I was like, “Ok, I’ll spray it and you rub it in. Show everybody.” And she was like [Claire shows me that the guest lifted her shirt over her head, exposing her stomach and breasts].

Interviewer: (Laughs).
Claire: I was like, and you know me, I try to be really light hearted about it and I grabbed my whip and I was like, “Does she need a whuppin’? Sit down!” and stuff. But you know, any situations where they’re tough like that, you definitely learn from. . . . But yeah, some people, they’ll put some, you know, they’ll turn around and try to put stuff on their nipple and somebody else will try to lick it off! (Laugh). In front of everybody! Sometimes you don’t know what that, you know, was it a group of swinger girls from a group get together? I was like, “You don’t know!” Even, in that situation, it’s not appropriate, you know. And you never know, ’cuz, you know, that was a group of college kids. But, you know, people don’t know, it’s like there’s some girls that will laugh and go along with it but they’re not gonna book a party.

Interviewer: Right, but they’re not comfortable. Right.

Claire: They’re uncomfortable, and so, you know, that’s what I tell them, [that demonstrations will be done on “appropriate” parts of the body]. Some parties I don’t say that to everybody, because they’re grown women and I’ve since learned to [say] “That’s all you’re gonna get.” And they’ll ask me, “Can I have some more?” “No, we’re not gonna demonstrate that here.”

In this excerpt, Claire discussed several important issues with the implementation of the sex toy party frame. First, she gave two separate examples of guests’ inappropriate disclosures and behaviors, and how she tried to manage those situations. In both of these instances, Claire’s guests inappropriately applied the pornographic frame (when one asked other guests to engage in illicit sexual behaviors, and when a guest exposed herself to Claire and other guests). Second, despite the fact that Claire said “sometimes you can’t control grown women,” she stated that she felt that it was her responsibility to control these disclosures and overly sexualized behaviors. If she did not correct the behavior (or did not address that this type of behavior was inappropriate), she feared that other guests would be uncomfortable and that it would negatively impact her business. Another concern, as other consultants alluded to relates to the guests’ use of slang terms for genitalia and sex acts; if it was not controlled and managed, the misapplication of frames could escalate if more and more guests began to apply the incorrect frame. Third, her mechanisms of control were playful and jokey, rather than stern and authoritarian. In both of these situations, Claire could have shamed the guests who behaved inappropriately; she could
have given them a stern talking to, asked them to leave, told them their behavior was inappropriate, or otherwise forcefully corrected their use of the pornographic frame. Instead, she used mild sexual innuendo (“Does she need a whuppin’?”) to gently guide the first guest back into the correct frame. In the second instance, she described how she steered guests who might want to try the more-erotic products (arousal creams, for example) away from the pornographic frame and back to the sex toy party frame. By carefully patrolling the borders of the sex toy party frame, consultants try to prevent the encroachment of other frames.

OCCUPYING THE MIDDLE: THE SEX TOY PARTY FRAME

One of the greatest challenges that the consultants faced was getting guests to employ the sex toy party frame rather than the medical/informational or pornographic frames. Getting guests to apply the correct frame required the consultant to lead by example rather than offering specific instructions as to how private information would be handled. Consultants demonstrated the sex toy party frame in a variety of ways, all designed to demarcate it from the other cultural frameworks that exist are used to discuss private sexual behaviors.

If we conceptualize privacy as a continuum between those behaviors that are completely inaccessible to others and those that are completely accessible, then it is reasonable to think about the framing of discussions of private sexual behavior as a continuum as well. The pornographic frame, at least in most people’s mind, occupies a place of complete accessibility. As Sarracino and Scott (2008:3) argued, pornography has “become mainstream, but the mainstream has become porned.” As pornography has become more common, more easily accessible, and more a part of mainstream American culture, we “are coming to see ourselves and one another in sexual terms first and foremost, regardless of age, and regardless as well of marital, professional, or social status” (Sarracino and Scott 2008:29). It is no surprise, then, that
in this cultural climate guests are apt to incorrectly apply the pornographic frame. Getting guests to apply the sex toy party frame rather than the pornographic frame required the consultant to be attuned to the language that she used, her body language, how she demonstrated products, and the games that she initiated with the guests. Furthermore, the consultant had to carefully manage disclosures of private sexual information to prevent alienation of other guests and to prevent guests from further using the pornographic frame. By engaging in boundary work and border patrol, the consultants attempted to guide guests to use the sex toy party frame rather than the pornographic frame.

The medical/informational frame, on the other hand, may be viewed as occupying the other extreme of the continuum: the completely private. Medical records are private, after all, and examinations in doctors’ offices are closed to those not in the health professions. This cultural frame for discussing private sexual matters is probably much more familiar to guests when they first attend a sex toy party. Guests who employed the medical/informational frame were probably less likely to inappropriately disclose private information, because they were either unwilling or unable to apply the sex toy party frame. Consultants, though, tried to emphasize the differences between the sex toy party frame and the medical/informational frame, largely by emphasizing their similarity to the guests, rather than the clear distinction between a medical professional and the patient that occurred in the usual deployment of the medical/informational frame. By asking questions that they viewed as essential to understanding their customer’s purchases, consultants sought to separate themselves from health care professionals, thereby encouraging the guests to employ the sex toy party frame rather than the medical/informational frame. Guests who misapplied medical frame often presented less of a
conflict for consultants because their lack of disclosures usually did not threaten to derail the creation and implementation of the sex toy party frame, although this was not universally true.

The sex toy party frame, then, occupies the middle ground between the extremes of the pornographic and medical/informational frame. Some disclosures of private sexual information are encouraged during the party (often as a way to increase sales when one guest exclaims the merits of a particular product), but the consultants had to be cautious that too much disclosure did not happen. This was particularly tricky, because the guests at the party could be quite diverse and could encompass either wide (acquaintances, friends of friends, or co-workers) or narrow (best friends, mothers, or sisters) social networks. This required a delicate balancing act for the consultants, and my observations and interviews indicate that consultants guided the guests through the creation and implementation of the new cultural frame in subtle and often non-verbal ways.

CONCLUSION

The construction and maintenance of the sex toy party frame was critical to the success of the party. Guests must have been able to distinguish between the medical/informational frame, the pornographic frame, and the newly built sex toy party frame if they were to engage in the party atmosphere and engage in disclosures of private information in an acceptable way. But the establishment of the sex toy party frame depended on other elements besides distinguishing it from other pre-existing frames; it also required that a new frame be established. How consultants built a new frame, created the frame’s boundaries, and maintained those boundaries are what we turn to next.
Figure 4.1 Overlap of Privacy Frames

Medical/Informational Frame
--high levels of abstraction
   --authority of doctor/educator
   --sterile setting
--impersonal relationship with doctor/educator

Sex Toy Party Frame
--moderate levels of abstraction
   --comfortable setting
--comfortable relationship with consultant

Pornographic Frame
--low levels of abstraction
--explicit body language
--encouraging personal stories
Figure 4.2 Abstraction Level of Frames.

From a cognitive sociological perspective, classification (or “lumping” and “splitting” the world into categories) is an essential part of the human experience. Zerubavel argued that we are guided by norms of classification to divide our world into “conventional islands of meaning” (1997:54). The distinctions that we make between experiences, places, chunks of time, or groups of people are not natural, according to cognitive sociology; instead, they are guided by our social groups or “thought communities.” We use a variety of methods to demarcate one classification from another, including dividing up space, time, identities, and creating “ritual transitions” from one state of being to another (Zerubavel 1991:18). These divisions allow us to create frames around our experiences; indeed, “framing is the act of surrounding situations, acts, or objects with mental brackets that basically transform their meaning by defining them” (Zerubavel 1991:11).

Frames exist for even those situations that seem as insignificant as a sex toy party. Even those guests who had never attended a sex toy party had likely attended some other kind of at-home sales event (Tupperware, Mary Kay, etc.), so they entered into the situation with a mental framework for the party already in place. This frame could have positive meanings (an evening of fun with friends), or negative ones (an obligation to attend and purchase products). In addition, they entered the situation with a “party” frame. As Mullaney and Shope (2012:108) found in their study of direct-sales companies, “even in instances where obligation serves as the driving force for getting guests to attend and later make a purchase, women expect a good time with their friends once they are at the party.” Also, they indicated, "because the encounter is defined as a party, the norms of U.S. middle-class social etiquette, such as an emphasis on
friendliness and comfort, prevail” (Mullaney and Shope 2012:108). Mullaney and Shope’s work indicates that even in instances where there is a “sales” motivation to host and attend a party, the “frame” of party (having fun, socializing, being comfortable, etc.) still applies. An additional framework that guests brought to the party was one regarding sexuality and sex in American culture. Although a common perception is that sex, sexuality, and sexual behaviors fit into but one frame—one of “privacy” or “secrecy”—there are many different frames that can be applied to sex. But, as guests soon learned, there are many common challenges to the “sex is private” frame. As Zerubavel (1991:12) noted:

The way framing helps to de-eroticize what we normally consider sexual is quite suggestive of the remarkable transformational capacity of frames. In the context of art, respectability is granted to otherwise obscene literary passages and poetic metaphors... the play frame helps de-eroticize games such as “house” and “doctor.” Ordinary sexual meanings are likewise antisepticised by science, which allows genital display in anatomy books, and medicine, which de-eroticizes mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and gynecological examinations.

Like the art, play, science, and medicine frame, the sex toy party is a distinct frame that challenges what we consider as “sexual” or “explicit.” Thus an important element of the consultant’s job was to help guests (in particular, “party virgins”) develop a frame for sex toy parties. A significant challenge for consultants was that “crossing the fine lines separating such experiential realms from one another involves a considerable mental switch from one ‘style’ or mode of experiencing to another” (Zerubavel 1991:11).

This chapter examines several ways that this “sex toy party frame” developed. First, I assess how consultants and guests categorized and demarcated a variety of different “identities,” separating themselves from “other(s),” and how that division served to engender a sense of bonding among the guests and consultant. Next, I review how space and time were partitioned at parties, and the functions that these spaces and temporalities (and the very nature of their
separateness) served for guests and for consultants, and how these spaces served to aid in the construction and maintenance of the boundaries around the sex toy party frame as it related to disclosures of private information. Finally, I discuss the notion of “rituals of transition,” and consider how transitions during the party served to reinforce the separation between physical and temporal realms, how those separations helped to signify whether disclosures were appropriate or inappropriate, and helped to make meaning for guests and consultants.

CREATING A SHARED SENSE OF IDENTITY: SPLITTING MEN AND WOMEN

Zerubavel (1991:14) has argued that “the self is but one particular focus of identity,” and that, therefore, “there are many other answers to the existential question of where we end and the rest of the world begins.” Individuals experience themselves as individuals and also as members of groups that are “perceived by others as insular entities [that are] clearly separate from everyone else.” This perception—that individuals are parts of a larger “we”—is critical to the success of sex toy parties.

In order for separate groups (“us” and “them”) to exist, there must be a boundary that surrounds and separates the groups. These boundaries help us to understand who is a part of our social group and who is not; who should be included in our “we” and who should be excluded. Zerubavel (1991:41) has said that if a group is to be successful in separating itself from non-members (in this case, separating women from men), the members of the groups must be differentiated from each other. One of the most effective ways of creating this sense of difference is by “playing up the ways in which group members are different from non-members” (Zerubavel 1991:41).

At sex toy parties, there were clear-cut lines between “us” and “them,” and the division began at the planning stages of the party. In most cases, for example, men were prohibited from
attending parties by the corporate office. The absence of men—which the consultants said they were grateful for—allowed the women in the room to bond over their shared experiences as women, rather than as wives/girlfriends, mothers, or simply as friends. In addition, the absence of men allowed for humor that was at the expense of men, which further served to unite the women and separate them from men.

Unsurprisingly, much of the classification of men and women that occurred at sex toy parties—the factors that allowed them to be “lumped” and “split”—were related to sex. There were nearly constant comparisons between men and women’s sexuality, sex drives, experiences of sex, and knowledge of sex; although the women were in a supportive and caring environment, these comparisons often depended on culturally-bound understandings of sex and gender. In these narratives, men were presented as sexually voracious (but perhaps not all that skilled or knowledgeable about women’s sexuality); women, on the other hand, were presented as knowing “the truth” about sex, but needed to be “empowered” regarding their sexuality. This education, while sex-positive on its surface, could also include encouraging practices that were decidedly not-sex-positive (including tricking men into using products, withholding information from partners, and almost universal exclusion of same-sex sexuality), and depended largely on reinforcing gendered stereotypes about sexuality.

“They Have These Very Delicate Egos That We Have to Tiptoe Around”: Masculinity at Sex Toy Parties

One of the most common tropes about men that were discussed by consultants during our interviews and during the parties was that men were immature and/or ignorant when it came to sex. Men were often discussed in loving but disparaging ways; the guests and consultants at the parties I observed commiserated over how immature and naïve their men could be, and enjoyed
laughing at the (sexual and otherwise) foibles of men. Much of the laughter at men’s expense was about protecting men’s “delicate” egos. One of the (many) reasons why consultants said they did not want men attending parties was because of this humor. Poking fun at men during their demonstrations was nearly universal, and if men were present, consultants would have had to dramatically alter their sales pitch. I was never able to attend a couples’ party to confirm whether or not consultants did adjust their sales techniques when men were present, largely due to the fact that the vast majority of the consultants I interviewed were employed by one company which prohibited men from attending parties. When Michaela discussed whether she would do parties for men (either a party where all of the guests were men, or a “couples’ party”) she said:

I think it would definitely change. . .you would have to find a completely different way to talk about the product. Because making fun of men with women may go ok, and making fun of them alone may go ok, but making fun of them in front of them, in front of their women. . .[makes a “no” sound].

Michaela made an interesting point that was reflected in other consultants’ interviews.

Men, in her opinion, could be made fun of in single-sex groups, but the real problem was making men the butt of jokes in front of their female partners. In this instance—which was echoed by other consultants—women knew the “truth” about male sexuality, but they did not want to force their men to acknowledge it, certainly not in front of other guests (men or women). In this way, men were presented as being ignorant about sex, in particular about women’s sexual needs. Carolyn offered an example of this during her interview when she discussed why men might be reluctant to attend the parties with their female partners.

Because more often than not the response [from men] is “What I’m doing is working, so it’s ok” (laugh). They don’t want to find out, they don’t want to do different things, and that’s probably the thing that I hear the most often. “My husband says what he’s doing is working, and it must be fine, and I am so over it and ready for something new.” And then they want to know “How do I introduce this without hurting his feelings?” (laugh).
In this example, Carolyn illustrated a theme that was common throughout the interviews and the observations: men needed guidance when it came to pleasing their female partners, but women were wary of offering guidance for fear that they would hurt men’s feelings or bruise their egos. Men were often presented as unwilling to learn about sex; indeed, the consultants and guests often thought that men were unwilling to admit that any of their sexual skill was learned at all. Jillian echoed these sentiments during our interview, when she discussed men’s inability to admit they had to “learn” about sex: “There’s something about the male ego, though. Like they don’t want to admit that they were taught anything. . .they’re gonna be like, ‘I’ve known that. . .I was born knowin’ that’ (laugh).”

This theme appeared during the parties as well, often when the consultants began discussing the toys and the variety of purposes they served. During Carolyn’s party, for example, she began by discussing the usefulness of the toys by saying that men sometimes need “guidance” in the bedroom. The problem with men, Carolyn said, was that they think “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” Unfortunately, if you “act pleased just to be nice, he thinks it’s great.” In this case, men were discussed in terms that made them seem less than adept at pleasing their partners, and women were chided for being too passive and “acting” as if they were pleased.

Women, on the other hand, were present at the sex toy party, so they were clearly willing to learn about the products and about ways to improve their sex lives and relationships. Kimmel (2012) has noted that, over the course of American history, male sexuality has been presented as “women’s problem.” This notion is reflected in the decision to exclude of men at sex toy parties. Rather than attempting to educate men as well as women, or attempting to challenge normative constructions of male and female sexuality and gender, the consultants and guests simply...
reinforced the social boundaries between “masculinity” and “femininity,” placing the improvement of sexual experiences and relationships largely in the woman’s domain.

Another issue that consultants addressed with guests was how to introduce toys into their sexual relationship while not “threatening” their male partners. While discussing why she was glad men were not allowed at the parties, Candace argued that the male ego was a major challenge for women who wanted to introduce a toy into their sex lives:

It would be weird. First of all I just don’t think men could handle it. They act like a 12 year old school girl. . .schoolboy. I’d never be able to get through a party. I mean they really can’t handle it. They think they can, and they can’t. ‘Cuz they’re very delicate egos. . .you know, and men don’t ever want to feel like they are not “good enough” in the bedroom. Most of the time when women are buying a bedroom accessory, it has nothing to do with the man, which men don’t get. But usually it has nothing to do with how good or not good the man is in the bedroom, but they have these very delicate egos that we have to tiptoe around.

Candace’s statement contains many of the perceptions of men and masculinity that I observed at sex toy parties. First, men were presented as being “unable” to handle the party environment—it’s something they only “think they can handle.” If they were shown the reality, they would not be able to deal with it. In addition, Candace brought up men’s “delicate egos” which women had to negotiate if they wanted to introduce a toy into their relationship. Not only were men threatened by toys (because the presence of a toy implies that they are under-performing), but it was women’s responsibility to “tiptoe around” men’s delicate egos. Samantha discussed the same issues when I interviewed her, but here the implication that women were responsible for “reassuring” men is made explicit, even if that meant restricting their own sexual practices:

I feel like the only reason that a man wouldn’t want to get sex toys is because it intimidates him and makes him feel like, “Well I’m not doin’ what I’m supposed to do” or “She feel like I’m not doin’ what I supposed to do, and that’s why she doin’ it [so] she can’t have it.” I have had that question before and I always tell them to incorporate it into their own, you know, with him. Let him use it with you. . .don’t run off to the bathroom
and use it yourself ‘cuz I can see that makin’ him feel insecure. But let him feel that it’s just a part of the. . .you know.

Through their presentations of men as being generally inept or clueless about sex, the consultants effectively bonded the group of women together by presenting men as diametrically opposed to women. Women were willing to learn about sex and were willing to adapt their sexual repertoire if it meant improving their sex lives and their relationships. This was reflected in my interviews with consultants, and in my observations of the consultants’ demonstrations, conversations that occurred during the party, and guests’ questions in the ordering room. Men, the narrative went, were largely unwilling to do this work because they did not think it was work that needed to be done. If women wanted their relationships or their sexual experiences to change, it was their own responsibility.

There were very few challenges to this narrative, and the challenges that were presented were handled in very specific ways by the consultant. One example of a challenge—which happened more in the ordering room than during the party itself, so it did not usually directly challenge the construction of boundaries and shared identities at the parties—occurred when women had male partners with medical issues that prevented them from getting or maintaining an erection. For instance, at Jillian’s party, which was attended almost exclusively by nurses from a nearby hospital, several of the guests were talking about another guest before she arrived, and they were discussing how badly she needed to come to the party because her husband was having sexual difficulty stemming from medications that he was on. During the party, the guest was very vocal about the problems that she and her husband were encountering. She did not discuss the problems (or her husband) in a disparaging way, but she was very curious about every product that was demonstrated and whether or not it would help her and her husband. I noted in my field notes that she had a “one-track mind”; if it wasn’t something that could directly
help her situation, she was not interested in it. When she won a coupon book filled with “sexy coupons” during the introductory game, she said, “Well, a coupon book isn’t going to help me, is it?” This situation presented an obvious challenge to the narrative that men have high levels of sexual desire and women do not, and that men were always prepared to have sex and were easily aroused. Situations like this occurred occasionally, but it usually involved a guest that asked questions that the consultant thought were too specific for the larger audience (for example, if the guest had an allergy and wanted to know if the product contained that ingredient). Jillian handled this situation in the way that many of the consultants handled situations like this, which was to redirect the guest back to the party and to hold her questions for the ordering room. In this case, when the guest said that the coupon book “isn’t going to help me,” Jillian said, “Don’t you worry—we’ll find something that will help you in the ordering room.” This type of challenge occurred far more often in the ordering room than during the party, so it usually did not present a direct challenge to the narrative and the system of classification that was being developed during the party.

The second type of challenge that occurred was when guests directly challenged the narrative of gendered sexual desire, or the idea that some sexual practices are regarded as “work” by women. These challenges usually came in the form of questioning the need for a product. For example, when Carolyn began to demonstrate arousal creams (designed to create and heighten arousal; most of the companies have a variety of different “intensities” of creams for women, but only one for men), she initiated a discussion of the gendered nature of arousal. As I recorded in my field notes:

Carolyn started the demonstration by stating that, “Most of the time we’re ready [to have sex], but sometimes you don’t want to.” One of the guests challenged her by asking whether all women were like that, “Because in my house, it’s my husband that’s like, ‘Do we have to?’” The other guests laughed, but Carolyn seemed a little caught off guard by
the challenge to the narrative. She recovers quickly, though, and says, “Well, you go girl!”

Another similar example happened when consultants would demonstrate a gel designed to numb the throat (and suppress the gag reflex) to make oral sex easier for women. After the consultant described the gel and its purpose, one of the guests would often say, “Oh, I don’t have that problem,” or “I can suppress my gag reflex.” The consultants generally handled these challenges the way Carolyn did—by jokingly congratulating the guest and continuing on with the demonstration. These challenges, though they did occasionally occur, were not a significant challenge to the narrative being constructed, nor did they appear to damage the party environment or the narrative.

Although is it possible that guests who do not see their relationships reflected in the demonstrations and conversations would want to speak up and challenge the narrative, it is unlikely that they would, given the environment of the party depended on bonding over shared experiences. Because the consultants (and other guests) presented these depictions of men (and heterosexual relationships) as normative, guests who had other experiences (i.e., heterosexual couples who had free and open communication; women who were in non-monogamous relationships; women who were not in a relationship at all; and women who were in same-sex relationships) might have felt that their experiences would be stigmatized or that their contribution would not be appreciated, and perhaps elected to say nothing.

“Men are Like Microwaves and Woman are Like Crock Pots”: Gendered Perceptions of Sexual Desire and Arousal

Another exceedingly common theme was to portray male and female arousal trajectories and motivations as diametrically opposed. Men were depicted as being ready and willing for sex at any time, with very short arousal periods, and they were felt to be oblivious to their partner’s
pleasure or arousal needs. Women, on the other hand, were presented as almost universally slow to arouse and consultants characterized them as motivated primarily by emotions and thoughts, not visual stimulation. Women were also thought to prioritize domestic and care-giving obligations above sex.

During parties, considerable time was spent discussing and educating women about the differences between men and women’s arousal process and speeds. Women were commonly compared to “Crock Pots,” whereas men were compared to “microwaves.” In other words, women take a long time, but men “heat up instantly.” Women, guests were told, have the biggest sex organ—their brains—which could be “their best or worst enemy.” Statistics were given that indicated that for men, the average period of time from arousal to orgasm was between two to five minutes. But for women, the sexual response cycle was reported to take between fifteen to forty-five minutes. This often generated a lot of laughter, as the consultants usually asked the guests what they thought the average arousal time was, and women wildly exaggerated their guesses. (“Three days!” suggested one guest during Daphne’s party.) During a demonstration of arousal creams (which are designed primarily for women, but can be used on men), Melinda spoke about women’s slow arousal and how women are likely to prioritize sex below other domestic and care giving tasks.

During the party, Melinda says that men are easy to arouse—“the wind blows and the sails are up”—but women need a hurricane, a tsunami, and a tornado to get going. She tells the audience that arousal creams are designed to shift women’s thoughts from everything else you have to do in order to focus on sex. She asks, “How many of you are thinking about other things when you’re having sex?” and the women joke about needing to repair their ceilings or make grocery lists. Melinda says that for too many women, sex is a “have to” (as in, “I have to clean the kitchen, I have to make dinner, I have to get the kids into bed, and I have to have sex”) rather than a “want to” or “get to.”

While Melinda did emphasize that women should shift their thoughts about sex from “have to” to “want to,” encouraging women to actively pursue sexual pleasure, there was little
conversation about how to do that (other than using a product). There were very few conversations during the parties about involving men in household duties or child-care or how reducing one’s stress level might make sexual activity a more-enticing possibility.

Another common way of discussing women’s difficulty with arousal was to depict women who aroused easily or who had vaginal orgasms as “lucky” or as the target of jealousy from other women. This occurred at several of the parties I attended:

Melinda explains that the vast majority of women need clitoral stimulation in order to have an orgasm. She explains that there is “nothing wrong with you” if a woman does have vaginal orgasms, just that it’s very rare. One of the guests interrupts her and says, “Yeah, but I hate you,” and Melinda immediately says, “Yeah, bitches!” in a sarcastically aggressive tone. All of the guests laugh.

* * *

Carolyn began the toy-centric part of the demonstration by discussing clitoral orgasms. Being able to orgasm from vaginal penetration is rare, she said, but for those “lucky women” that manage to orgasm during sex, she said, “Screw you!” “For the rest of us,” she continues, clitoral stimulation is necessary.

These examples illustrate how women’s sexual “difficulties” were made legitimate, which further served to unite the women as having common experiences. By pointing out that easily-aroused women were uncommon—and were even jokingly referred to as “bitches”—the consultants made those women the “abnormal” ones. Because they were “lucky” to be able to orgasm easily or from vaginal penetration, the consultants removed blame from those who did not have that experience. Luck, after all, occurs because of chance or accident, not due to experience or skill. Women who were slow to arouse or who might have had difficulty orgasming had their experiences legitimated and highlighted as being the norm. Although the consultants implied that women who did not experience easy arousal were “unlucky,” at least they were numerous and normative in their “unluckiness.” Because they were depicted as “not normal” and made the object of jealousy from other women, guests who might have had the
opposite experience were probably less likely to speak up; it would have been quite thoughtless of them now that they knew they were “lucky” to be in the minority.

While men were presented as having delicate egos regarding their sexual performance and their ability to please their partner, sex was often presented as a “chore” for women, and many products were discussed as helping to alleviating the “work” from sex. But because their male partners had delicate egos, these sexual acts could not be presented to their partners as “work,” or as “unpleasant.” Instead, women were instructed to trick their partners into using products, or to disguise their use of products from their partners. In our interview, Lexi illustrated several of these issues:

Lexi: I always joke around about, like, you know, our [products for oral sex]. It’s usually not our favorite chore to do, and I think, you know, men are, you know, so sensitive about anything to do with their, you know, penis, and they’re just like, I don’t know, “Oh, I last fine,” or, you know, “Oh, I’m big enough.”

Interviewer: Right. “We don’t need that.”

Lexi: So, I don’t think they think about, [that] maybe it’s the other person that maybe has an issue with it. . .and they don’t want to know that. So when you sell to a woman she can bring it home and delicately say, “Well, let me just try this out, see how it works;” without actually explaining it to them.

Lexi’s demonstration during the party also conveyed this perspective:

While demonstrating a flavored warming lubricant that is designed to be used during oral sex, Lexi said, “Some women like to do the job, and some don’t.” Her personal philosophy is the “ABCs of oral favors: anniversaries, birthdays, and Christmas.” The group laughs, and the hostess’ mother blurts out, “At most—that might be one or two [too] many letters.” The hostess rolls her eyes and says in a shocked tone, “Thanks, mom!” Later in the party, while demonstrating a cream that suppresses gag reflexes (to be used during “oral favors”), Lexi says in an exasperated tone that the guests shouldn’t worry, it’s not a numbing cream, because “If it were, it would never be over.” The guests laugh.

In her interview and in the party, Lexi discussed oral sex as a “job,” a “chore,” and a “favor.” The “ABC philosophy,” though it generated laughter (and even more laughter when the
hostess responded to her mother’s comment), further reinforced the notion that men and women have different levels of sexual desire; specifically, that men desire to have sex all the time, whereas women view sex as a “chore” to be engaged in as rarely as possible.

Although Lexi only alluded to it during her interview, she illustrated a common theme at the parties I attended: consultants often encouraged their guests to “trick” men into using toys or engaging in specific sexual acts. One example of this (though there are many) was when the consultants exhibited male masturbation sleeves. This product, which is usually made of a soft jelly-like silicone, was demonstrated at nearly every party I observed (and is a top seller, according to the consultants). Despite its popularity, guests were often reluctant to try it during the party and expressed disbelief that their male partners would be interested in such a product.

Demonstrations for the product varied, but in most of the parties I observed, the consultant would ask the women to close their eyes and “give [her] a stiffy” by extending their forefingers. The women were also instructed that no matter what kind of sounds they heard, they should not open their eyes. After applying lubricant to the sleeve, the consultants would walk around the room, massaging the sleeve on each woman’s finger. This usually produced shocked (and sometimes disgusted) utterances from the guests, which resulted in lots of laughter. The demonstration would generally continue with the consultant using a dildo with a suction-cup base to show the women how they could use the toy on their partners. In most cases, the consultants discussed the benefits of the product for women during oral sex. Because it was an open-ended sleeve, men could ejaculate inside of it (“she swallows so you don’t have to”) and it could easily be cleaned (“it’s your quicker licker picker upper”). Some guests, however, remained unconvinced. When they expressed disbelief that men would allow them to have such a product used on them, consultants often gave instructions on how to trick men into using it.
Women, they would say, should pretend that they are performing oral sex on their partners (usually, by moving their heads up and down under the blankets); in reality, they are using the toy. Men, the guests were told, would never know the difference. Breanne discussed this during her interview and described both the concerns that some women have buying products for their partners and the element of trickery:

And you know, [I] get some that say, “Well, he’s not gonna let me use that on him.” “What do you mean he’s not gonna let you use that on him? Put a blindfold on him, he’s not gonna know. All he’s gonna know is you’re touchin’ it, and he’s gonna be happy.”

While the demonstration was an interactive and fun experience, engaging the guests and producing much laughter, the suggestion that women should lie to or trick their partners belied the notion that sex toy parties can create open communication between partners. In addition, this demonstration and the accompanying instructions (which were exceedingly common at parties I observed) illustrated that men and women were fundamentally different with regard to sex. Men could be “tricked” into using a product because they were thrilled to be engaged in any kind of sex. Women, on the other hand, needed a device to help remove some of the “work” of sex; they also were placed in the position of having to protect the ego of their partners.

Another common example of the “tricking” that was proposed at the parties involved the use of lubricants. Men, consultants would tell guests, would take it personally if their partner needed or wanted to use a lubricant; this was an indication that he had not aroused her as well as he could have, or that she did not find their activities arousing. Women were then encouraged to apply the lubricant before they engaged in any sort of sexual activity—hiding the bottle in the bathroom and applying it in secret, for example—and then engage in sexual intercourse without telling their partner that they had used a lubricant.

During her party, Daphne describes how to apply the lubricant before sexual activity so that you don’t have to tell your partner. She tells the women to say to their partners, in a
seductive and sexy voice, “Look what you made me do.” We do this, she says, so that we can “Stroke his ego” but also make yourself more comfortable, and he never needs to know the truth.

* * *

During the demonstration, Lexi describes the lubricant as “My secret weapon,” telling the guests to apply it before you have sex, but don’t tell him. “He’ll think he’s the one that got you all hot and bothered, and he never needs to know the difference.”

This suggestion—to actively hide information from partners—was exceedingly common at parties. Rather than teaching women how to have open and honest conversations with their partners about their sexual needs and desires, or educating women about how to communicate with their partners about sexual issues they may be having, women were often encouraged to simply adopt the product in lieu of discussing these issues with their partners.

This contradictory message—sexual empowerment and education for women on one side, and sexual passivity and on the other—was another way of connecting to women. By presenting what they believe to be the “normative experience” of women and femininity—in relation to male sexuality, because one cannot exist without the other—consultants generated more of a sense of “togetherness” with their guests. Guests were unlikely to challenge this narrative. Not only was the consultant often viewed as the “expert” in the room, but to present a significant challenge to the narrative would have been considered a breach of party etiquette.

CREATING A SHARED SENSE OF IDENTITY: LUMPING WOMEN TOGETHER

Another essential part of creating boundaries between women and men is to examine how the parties presented women as being, in Zerubavel’s words, a “clearly separate entity from everyone else” (1991:14). It was not enough to separate men from women; in this space, it was important to create a sense of bonding “as women.” Even though much of the bonding and sense of shared identity was centered around women’s shared experiences of sex and sexuality, there are other mechanisms that consultants used to create a sense of shared identity among the guests.
One important way that consultants related to other women—and created a sense of shared experience as women—was to share their personal stories of how they came to be consultants.

“She’s Like Me”: What a Sex Toy Party Consultant Is

Consultants often started their parties by describing how they decided to do this type of work, the benefits that they received from their work (both financial and otherwise), and answering questions from the guests (usually in the form of a game). Telling their story served a number of purposes, but the most important purpose was to show the guests that they are “just like them.” The importance of story telling was conveyed to consultants in their training from their company, parties they observed while a trainee, and from their own experiences as guests prior to becoming a consultant. Candace, who had been a consultant for almost five years, began her career doing parties part time to try to pay off debt. After she lost her job after having her first child, she decided to do parties full time.

Even before I play the game, I tell them my story. And I basically tell the story I told you at the beginning: how I wanted to pay off debt and how I went to a party and then I signed up and became a consultant. . .and you know, blah blah blah. . .I lost my job. . .I tell that whole story, because it’s relate-able and you can physically see people in the room, the body language, relax. You can physically see it, when I start to talk to them and tell them my story because they don’t know me, they just think I’m going to sell them something. Which I AM, but I’m also there to educate them and empower them and give them a really fun girls’ night in. . .so, you know, you have to. . .you have to just create that kind of buying environment and that’s why, when I tell my story, I connect with people and they physically like start to like relax and go, “Ok. . .she’s like me.”

Candace’s story telling served a number of purposes. First, it allowed the guests to relate to her; they could see that “she’s like me,” and that she may have faced challenges and life events similar to their own. Telling their story also defused some of the nervous tension in the room—guests’ body language visibly changed from tense to relaxed—and the guests were often more talkative and asked more questions after the story-telling had concluded. Many of the consultants’ stories included struggles that they faced, including job loss, divorce, unfulfilling
careers, medical issues and illness, and in some cases, extreme financial difficulties. Josie told her story at the start of the party, including eviction notices, having her utilities shut off, and borrowing money from a friend in order to start her business. During our interview, Josie said:

I used to be embarrassed to tell people that, you know, the eviction notice and all that, but it’s made me stronger and helped me get where I am now. . .I think so, because then women can relate to. . .or maybe that woman that’s had the creditors calling or struggled to pay bills or, you know, purchased a home or they pay for things in cash.

Josie’s struggles made her relatable to guests, and the fact that she used to be embarrassed to share her story was something that she readily told guests. During the party that I observed, she prefaced her story by telling the guests that she used to be embarrassed to tell this story, but she realized now that it was a common experience and one that she now found empowering. These stories were not told as an attempt to garner pity from the guests; instead, they were used to create a sense of connection and commonality between the guests and the consultants. Moreover, these stories were often accompanied by asides and jokes that directly asked the guests to consider whether their lives are like the consultants’. Making statements like, “Ladies, I know I can’t be the only one that has gone through this,” or “But none of you ladies know what I’m talking about, do you?” with a wink-and-a-nod tone encouraged the audience to consider whether they had gone through similar experiences and whether they knew what she was talking about.

One of the elements of the story-telling was the emphasis on the empowerment and freedom that becoming a consultant had given each woman. Stories of debt, financial hardship, and unfulfilling careers often concluded with “And now I am my own boss! I make my own hours, take vacation time when I want, and am financially secure.” A beneficial by-product of sharing one’s story and creating a sense of collective identity was that guests could start to
imagine themselves running their own sex toy party business. Kendra illustrated this during our interview when she discussed why she would tell her story to the guests:

After I get everything set up I definitely mingle. I go and I walk up and I’ve learned to ask them lots of questions about them and focus zero on me which is very hard because as soon as anybody finds out [what she does for a full-time job], they’re like, the questions tend to focus back towards me and I have to push it back on them because that’s really not what this is at all. [But] I do share it because it’s important that people know that they can do this job no matter what. I get people that tell me all the time, “I don’t have time, I go to school and I do whatever.” I’m like, “Listen, I have three kids under seven, I work a full-time job away from home, and I do this and I have a family life and I’m, you know, the room mom and whatever.” So it’s, it can be done.

Of course, challenges and difficulties that the consultants faced were often not immediately addressed during their story telling. Some consultants followed their story telling with a question-and-answer game that allowed guests to ask questions about the demands of the business. Occasionally, guests asked questions that specifically challenged the narrative of success—and the development of a shared identity—that the consultants offered. Chief among these were questions about whether or not party plan business were “pyramid schemes” or “Ponzi schemes,” which were common questions for consultants in a wide variety of multi-level marketing plans (Mullaney and Shope 2012). Candace dealt with a question like this during her introductory game, in which guests asked questions about the business for prizes:

Following several fairly standard questions about the business (e.g., how difficult is it for new consultants to book parties, and how expensive is it to start), one of the guests asks whether “this is just a pyramid scheme,” in a skeptical and slightly sarcastic tone. Candace explains that she does earn money from her recruits, but it comes from the corporate office; her recruits do not write her a check when they have a party. She states that being a sex toy party consultant is work, and that while she give new consultants the tools they need to succeed, women should treat it as a “get rich quick scheme.” She concluded this explanation by saying that “if you think about it, regular work is a pyramid scheme, because there’s always someone profiting off of others’ labor.” The guests nod and murmur in agreement.

An essential part of being able to connect with guests was to find common ground with them; essentially, the consultants needed to create a sense of shared identity with the guests.
Whether that common ground was through stories of job loss, financial struggle, or religiosity, the consultants believed that the narrative they told was relatable to many people in the audience. Questions about pyramid schemes in particular challenged the construction of this narrative because they were based on the notion that consultants exploited their recruits, and that they pressured potential recruits in unscrupulous ways with the goal of increasing their profits. Candace’s answer was representative of the responses that consultants I observed gave when asked about pyramid schemes, though not all guests were as confrontational in their tone when asking as hers.

Whether the consultants were successful in creating a shared identity often could not be determined until after the party and the private ordering had concluded. There was considerable disagreement among the women I interviewed as to what defined a “successful” party. While most of the consultants admitted they would be discouraged by a party with low or no sales, many said that the goal of their parties was not to sell products; instead, the goal was to connect with and educate women. One way that this could be measured was whether or not the consultant felt like she “connected” with the guests, and whether there was a feeling of a long-term relationship between herself and the guests. In the following passage, Kimberly commented on how this connection could develop quickly over the course of the party:

And sometimes, I mean sometimes they’ll just totally like talk to me about their life and their kids and everything. Like they feel like they’ve totally. . .I don’t know. Like I have some parties where there’s some people at my parties where we have an instant connection, I feel like I’ve known them for a million years and you know, they feel that way too and they’ll start talking to me and people will be like bangin’ on the door and sayin’, you know, “Hey, are you done in there? Ordering the whole catalog?” and its like, “No, I was just talking to Kimberly for a minute.”

Patricia made a similar connection between the perceived longevity of her relationships to her guests as a barometer of the success of the party (and her ability to create a shared sense of
identity). Speaking about why she thought her guests were comfortable talking to her about
details of their sexual lives, she said:

Because I think I’m real. I kinda let people know, you know, how I am from the get-go. I
let them know, and I think I do put forth, like a lot of women after a party, they’re like,
“wow,” she’s like, you know, “I feel like I’ve known you forever,” you know, and I get
that a lot, so I think that’s why people feel comfortable with me. ‘Cuz I let them know
that I’m just like you, you know, and I was just like you and I had a lot of questions, and
I’m there to answer your questions. . . I don’t want you leaving here kinda like, you know,
baffled and you know, you’ve purchased something you don’t know what you’re doing,
you know, and if you don’t feel comfortable about the party, you know, you can call me
at any time. I’ll answer any question that you have.

Another way that consultants discussed their attempts to create a sense of shared
experience and identity was by describing their experiences with their guests as being one of
friendship. Nyssa’s story illustrated the idea that blending in with the group was important for
her as a consultant, and it was an important way to gauge whether or not the audience was
comfortable with her:

As soon as everyone comes in I make sure I introduce myself to them and let them know
I’m the consultant. ‘Cuz sometimes I sit there around talking with them and one of them
will say “Who’s the consultant?” And I’m like, “Me!” (laugh). And even though I’ll have
my little name tag on and everything, and they’re like, “Oh, I thought you were her friend
from work or something!” (laugh).

The following excerpt from Kimberly’s interview exhibits a similar idea: when she was
at a party, it did not feel like work (defined culturally as being the opposite of fun); instead, it felt
as though she was spending the evening with her friends. While she acknowledged that they
were probably not her girlfriends, she still was able to see her customers as friends and blend into
their group.

It never really feels like—and I’m probably sure you’ve heard this—I don’t really feel
like I’m working. It just feels like I’m having a fun time with the girlfriends, whether it’s
my girlfriends or not, it’s somebody’s girlfriends. . .we’re having a great time, and we’re
laughing and I have just as much fun, you know, talking to them.
Understanding how this connection happened and what factors might have impacted the development of a shared identity seemed somewhat elusive, even to the consultants. Emma alluded to this in our interview; here, she discussed how intangible the sense of community and shared experience could be, even for consultants as experienced as she was:

I think it just, I think there’s a connection there, I mean there’s some ladies that I’ve done parties for, and they’re like, “Well the other lady, she just, we just did not connect with her. We didn’t like her. . .” which is fine. And people can be saying that about me. But I feel like I am very genuine with people. I feel like I don’t have this air that I’m better than anybody, ‘cuz I don’t think I’m better than anybody. I really try to. . .if I’m going into a $400,000 house, if I’m going into a trailer, I treat them just the same and give them all the respect and. . .I feel like I really do try, I connect with people very well, once I can open up to them.

This excerpt from Emma’s interview demonstrated how elusive a sense of shared identity could be. Her guests and customers could not identify why they did not connect with their previous consultant, and Emma acknowledged that it was possible that some of her previous guests might have felt the same lack of connection with her. For Emma and for many of the consultants that I interviewed, an essential part of creating a sense of shared experience and identity was to be respectful of everyone, no matter what her preconceived notions might have been. In this way, she tried to avoid her own mental categorization of people, perhaps because she believed that categorization might have prevented her from connecting with her audience. In essence, she did not want what separated them (race, class, etc.) to override what united them: their gender. Because she was in their home, she could assess more about them (by the size of their house, state of the neighborhood, age and model of cars in the driveway, children’s toys in the yard, yellow ribbons tied to trees) than they could about her, so it was her responsibility to bridge the divisions that perhaps only she could see.

Consultants were with their guests for only a short period of time—a few hours at most—and quite often they had very limited contact with the guests after the party had concluded. In
this way, it was often challenging for consultants to determine if their methods of connecting with their audience were working. Even after observing twenty parties for this research, it was somewhat difficult for me to discern exactly what factors might have impacted the guests’ relationship with the consultant.

“I’m Normal Just Like Everybody Else Here”: What a Sex Toy Party Consultant is Not

Creating a sense of shared identity with the guests also included challenging their perceptions of what a “sex toy party consultant” was really like. Lexi and Candace both tried to convey that they were “normal” people, and telling their story was an important part of conveying their “normalcy.”

Lexi: I think a key to opening up is that, they have to kind of figure out who you are, ‘cause I’m the stranger in the room, I’m the one that nobody knows. So, I try to give them kind of a background and an overview, I’m a normal person, and I’m, you know, because I sell sex toys for a living does not mean I am, you know, some freak that, you know, has sex 12 times a day. I’m normal, you know, I’m normal just like everybody else here. So I try to, you know, make myself as normal as possible so that they can say, “Ok, she’s just an everyday person like us.” You know, we have consultants that are teachers, I mean, we’re normal people. You know, we’re not, you know, ex-prostitutes or, you know.

Interviewer: Perverts?

Lexi: Yeah (laugh).

Candace discussed similar preconceptions during her interview:

Because I think people, when you do this job, they think that you are this. . .if you went in your bedroom, you’re like hanging from the chandelier in like whips and chains. NOT true, at all. I mean you’re listening to me, like, I have a three year old and a newborn and I’m sitting here holding a newborn on a Boppy [pillow].

One of the challenges that many of the women faced was the perception of their work by outsiders, largely based around the misperception that sex toy party consultants were promiscuous, “sexual freaks,” or were obsessed with sex, as Lexi and Candace alluded to in their interviews. Many of the consultants addressed these misperceptions with their guests at the
beginning of the party. Some subtly addressed this perception through their stories—showing that they were “just like” the attendees—whereas others explicitly addressed this perception in their introduction. During our interview, Claire spoke at length about her Christian religious conviction and the depth of faith of her customers. In fact, many of her customers were extremely religious, and her demonstration was peppered with Biblical passages, references to her religiosity, and participation in the church. During our interview, Claire discussed how she provides her “bona fides” to the audience:

Claire: ‘Cuz they know that I’m a Christian, too, you know what I mean, and that I was [able to] prove to them that I know my stuff as far as Biblical things and like that.

Interviewer: You’re giving them your bona fides. Yeah, yeah.

Claire: Exactly. And so when they sense that, you know, “Ok, she knows what I’m talking about; we are on the same page.”

It seemed from our interview that Claire did not really adjust her introduction or the religiosity of her demonstration depending on the audience. She told me during our interview that a significant portion of her customer base was comprised of religious women, so perhaps she did not need to modify her approach (or, alternatively, she moderated the amount of religious references if the audience did not seem to be responding). During her party (attended by ministers’ wives and active church members), Claire explicitly addressed her religious faith, and the fact that she did not see a conflict between her religious faith and the products that she sold:

Claire says that she decided to sign up after talking to her husband and her husband sought “counsel” with some church elders. She said that she couldn’t waste energy worrying about what other people thought of her, and the church elders told her that they thought it was a good idea. She is known as the “Christian consultant,” and thinks that this is fine with her religion because God created sex and pleasure, and he created parts of our bodies that are only for pleasure, so she sees no dirtiness in sex or in pleasure.

These examples from Claire’s party and interview illustrate another essential element to creating a sense of shared identity among the women. It was not enough that she was known by
her customers as “the Christian consultant;” she had to demonstrate her bona fides to the audience as well, which she did by quoting Biblical passages and using a common language of religion with her guests. Her story of having consulted both her husband and her church elders before starting her business (and gaining their blessing) further reinforced that she was “like” her guests.

“My Girlfriends and I Aren’t Like That, But Our Husbands Would Love It”: Heterosexism and Heteronormativity

Most of the techniques that consultants used to bond the women together (e.g., relying on shared experiences of motherhood and marriage and positioning women and men as opposites) depended in large part on the assumption that all of the women in attendance were heterosexual. These bonding techniques not only served to reinforce traditional and hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality, but they created (intentionally or unintentionally) “an environment where compulsory heterosexuality [was] replicated and enforced” (Fine 2011:155). Fine (2011) examined the experiences of lesbian and bisexual women who had attended sex toy parties and found that the heteronormative nature of sex toy parties was problematic for some of her participants. Despite this, Fine’s (2011:155) participants indicated that they valued the bonding and community-building that occurred at sex toy parties, “[indicating] that although compulsory heterosexuality was generated and contributed to heterosexism, there may be positive social and interpersonal benefits of attending a sex toy party, even for nonheterosexual women.” Storr (2003) argued that a significant portion of the bonding that occurred between women at sex toy parties was derived from boundary play between female homosociality and lesbianism, in particular through games that had lesbian connotations. When this “flirting with danger” went wrong, Storr (2003: 73) argued, the boundaries between female homosociality and lesbianism
were reinforced with homophobic or lesbophobic comments. Though Storr’s (2003) research did not explicitly examine the experiences of nonheterosexual women who attended sex toy parties, her findings did encourage me to be attuned to similar types of boundary play and homophobic comments at the parties I observed.

Storr’s (2003) finding of lesbophobia at parties not only acted as a sensitizing concept during my observations, but it also informed my interview schedule. During our interviews, I asked consultants about whether they had ever had lesbian or bisexual guests at their parties, and whether the presence of lesbian or bisexual women caused them to alter their sales pitch, the language they used, or the products they displayed. Their responses, and my observations, illustrated three points. First, the sex toy parties I observed and the interviews I conducted with consultants supported Storr’s (2003) and Fine’s (2011) findings that sex toy parties were a social environment that reinforced heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality. Second, consultants (and sometimes hostesses) made assumptions about what sexual practices lesbian and bisexual women engaged in. These assumptions often caused them to eliminate certain products from the demonstration that they thought would be inappropriate or unsuitable for lesbian women or, conversely to show additional products that they deemed appropriate only for lesbian women. Finally, the presence of lesbian and bisexual party guests often illuminated the heteronormative nature of the party and the products to the consultants themselves. The presence of lesbian and bisexual women forced them to confront the (perceived) lack of products for lesbian women and to examine, sometimes for the first time, the heteronormativity that they engaged in during their demonstrations.
“Do We Have Any Lesbian Couples Who Are Coming?”: Heteronormativity and Heterosexism

Heteronormativity is generally used to refer to “practices that derive from and reinforce a set of take-for-granted presumptions relating to sex and gender…[and] to the myriad ways in which heterosexuality is produced as a natural, unproblematic, taken-for-granted, ordinary phenomenon” (Kitzinger 2005:478). These assumptions include that it is “natural” for men and women to be attracted to each other and that same sex couples are a deviation from the norm (Kitzinger 2005). As Seidman (1991:186) argued, heterosexual dominance and privilege is “deeply rooted in social life, not just a product of law or individual prejudice.” Rich (1980) discussed how heteronormativity has rendered homosexuality—and in particular, lesbianism—invisible, and has resulted in a heterosexist society which “assumes everyone is straight until proven gay” (Fine 2011:146).

From both my interviews and the way the consultants presented products during demonstrations, it was clear that sex toy parties were a site that reproduced heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality. The products demonstrated, the way they were demonstrated, and the language the consultants used during the parties centered almost exclusively on heterosexual couples, to the exclusion of queer women (single or partnered) and single heterosexual women. Almost all of the products, including the non-erotic products like lotion, massage oil, and body wash, were positioned as being useful to heterosexual women to entice “their men” into sex or to appear more attractive to “him,” even though those products could be used by anyone of any gender or sexual identity. The repeated and near-constant use of masculine pronouns during parties I observed reinforced the heterosexist assumptions that consultants, and their company, made about the guests in attendance. Even those consultants who did occasionally use “partner” in their demonstrations (or who told me during our interviews that
they made a conscious effort to use the word “partner”) often reverted back to the use of masculine pronouns. This focus on (partnered) heterosexuality excluded women who did not have male partners, including single women in attendance.

Based on my interviews, it seemed that the consultants assumed all of the guests were heterosexual (and currently partnered) unless they were explicitly told otherwise. When asked, consultants could clearly remember “lesbian” parties, marked by either the hostess informing the consultant ahead of time that there would be lesbian or bisexual women in attendance or the guests coming out to the consultant during the course of the party or during the ordering room. This clear remembrance and mental marking of “lesbian” parties indicated that the rest of the parties were “unmarked,” in line with Brekhus’ (1996) discussion of social markedness. When something is socially marked, according to Brekhus (1996:500), the “‘the social mind’ actively perceives one side of a contrast while ignoring the other side as epistemologically unproblematic.” The marked element is separated from the unmarked portion in a number of ways, but among them are the fact that the “marked appears to represent a specialized subset of the whole…[and] critical distinctions within the unmarked item are ignored” (Brekhus 1996:500). When they marked lesbian and bisexual parties as different from heterosexual parties (both in their memories and in their presentation of different types of products at those parties), consultants not only separated those parties from “regular” parties, but left the “regular” parties (and the heteronormativity and heterosexism that went with “normalcy”) unexamined and unchallenged. Unless they were told otherwise, they assumed that all parties would fall into the “unmarked” category of heterosexual parties.

Even when consultants were explicitly told that lesbian/bisexual women would be attending, this discussion did not seem to override the presumption of heterosexuality. My
interview with Kendra illustrated both the invisibility of lesbian woman and the presumption of heterosexuality:

I find my hardest parties to be lesbian parties or parties where there are some lesbians there. Um, this one was one of those where I showed up (laughs), I had no idea what I was getting myself into. Like, the [hostess] was like, “Oh yeah, there are two brides and we’re getting ready to party.” I’m like “Ok.” I didn’t think lesbian, I thought two women were getting married.

Interviewer: Two brides, [but] not getting married to each other.

Kendra: Right, two bridal showers on the same night. Yeah. So I show up and I’m like “Oh you’re [the brides], who are you guys marryin’?” “Each other.” I’m like “Oh.” I was like “Sorry, it’s the first news I’ve gotten of it.” I was like, “I had no idea.”

Consultants were not the only ones who assume that all of the guests were heterosexual or who privileged heterosexuality above other sexual identities. Guests sometimes made statements that implied that heterosexuality was normative, as this excerpt from my field notes from Carolyn’s party illustrated:

Carolyn shows the strap-on (only the second time I saw a “lesbian” product being demonstrated at a party), and there is a discussion between Carolyn and the guests as to whether or not this product is supposed to be used between heterosexual couples. Carolyn states that yes, it can be used between heterosexual couples or, she says, “Between girlfriends.” It seems clear to me that when she said “girlfriends,” she meant in the sense of romantic relationships between women, but one of the guests says (rather loudly), “Hey, my girlfriends and I aren’t like that, but our husbands would love it.” It’s clear from the guest’s tone and her emphasis on the word “girlfriend” that she means the word in the context of non-sexual female friendship.

As this example illustrated, both consultants and guests presumed heterosexuality to be the dominant sexual identity of guests. This guest seemed to misunderstand Carolyn’s use of the term “girlfriend,” in large part because of the invisibility of lesbian and bisexual women’s experience (both at that party, where no guests were out as lesbians, and in the larger society). In addition, she reinforced the notion that lesbianism is only acceptable among women as a possibility for fulfilling what “women think men are imagining,” in the form of a sexual fantasy among men (Storr 2003:80).
Consultants told me repeatedly that they sometimes did not realize there were lesbian or bisexual women in the audience until the party was over and the guests were ordering. This realization often happened when guests either came out to the consultant in the ordering room or because a couple came into the ordering room to order together. Alicia illustrated this during her interview when she stated: “The first time that I did a party with two lesbians, I had no idea the whole time that they were a couple until the end. They came in the ordering room together and were like ‘There’s nothing in here [the catalog] for us.’” Alicia’s encounter with this couple led her to question the general lack of products her company carried for lesbian women and how that exclusion might make her nonheterosexual guests feel (a point I will return to later in this section).

Consultants often told me that they asked their hostesses in the pre-party planning stage if there would be lesbian women in attendance, as Daphne discussed during our interview:

I even ask, I ask my hostess, “Do we have any lesbian couples who are coming, who will be attending?” Just so, and I tell them, “That way I can gear my demonstration toward them too,” because they use the same products but sometimes it’s a little different.

Though Daphne was actively trying to make sure all of her guests were comfortable by not assuming that everyone was heterosexual, her approach (which was used by a number of consultants during the pre-party planning) was flawed in a variety of ways. First, it assumed that the hostess knew the sexual identity of all of her guests, which may not have been the case. Second, the fact that consultants felt the need to ask about the sexual identity of the guests underscored how hidden lesbian and bisexual women were at sex toy parties; rather than assuming that there might be queer women in the audience, the “default” or “regular” guest was heterosexual unless the consultant was told otherwise. Finally, the fact that consultants wanted to alter the demonstration in order to better serve guests that were not heterosexual was not
necessarily problematic; as Daphne mentioned, lesbian and bisexual women likely used the same products as heterosexual women, but used them differently. What was problematic, though, was the fact that consultants and hostesses often relied on stereotypes about lesbian and heterosexual relationships to inform their decisions about how to alter their demonstration (see following section).

Consultants told me that parties where lesbians were present were rare, and I never attended a “lesbian” party or one where the consultant told me that a guest was a lesbian or bisexual. I assume that, over the course of 20 observations, I encountered guests that were lesbian or bisexual, but none ever came out to me directly. Over the course of 20 observations, only on two occasions were ostensibly “lesbian” products demonstrated (a double-headed dildo and strap-on dildo). If consultants altered their demonstration only when they “knew” there would be queer women in attendance, then it seems safe to assume that at the remainder of the parties I observed, the consultants assumed (correctly or incorrectly) that there were no sexual minority women in attendance.

“And Then We Have a Couple Of Products that are Made For Two Women”: Assumptions About Lesbian and Bisexual Women’s Sexual Practices

When consultants were made aware that there would be lesbian or bisexual women in the audience, they often tried to tailor their demonstration to be more inclusive of those women (implying that the “normal” demonstration would not be particularly inclusive). While this might be viewed as an admirable attempt at inclusion, the assumptions of the consultants were not grounded in research or in the training that they received from their companies. In fact, none of the consultants I interviewed indicated that they received any training on offering inclusive parties or on the types of products that queer women might be interested in purchasing. This
finding regarding the lack of training on inclusiveness echoed Fine’s (2011) description of the experiences of one of her participants, who sought to work with sex toy party companies on inclusive training for consultants. As the participant related to Fine (2011:151): “We [she and the staff of the company] worked really well together, but then they came to the conclusion that ‘There weren’t going to be enough queer people at these parties. Forget it.’” Fine (2011:152) goes on to state that “after determining that meeting the needs of queer customers would not be as profitable as catering to the majority, [the company] decided to forgo being inclusive in their sales methods.” Because the consultants I interviewed lacked inclusive training (or did not view it as significant enough to warrant discussion during our interviews), they instead relied on their previous experiences with lesbian customers (which they viewed as representative of lesbian experience, though they likely were not) and on stereotypes about lesbian sexual practices to determine what products to demonstrate.

Consultants often told me that there were a number of products that they would eliminate from their demonstration if they knew the majority of the party guests were lesbians. While some of the eliminations made sense (e.g., eliminating creams that numb the throat and help to eliminate the gag reflex, or those that are designed to promote or create erections), other products seemed to be omitted based on heterosexist assumptions both about what sexual practices lesbian and bisexual women engage in and what “counts” as sex. Products that were often eliminated included c-rings (designed to constrict blood flow to the penis to extend the length of time an erection lasts, though most of the models also have clitoral stimulators and could easily be used in combination with a dildo) and phallic-shaped toys. Nyssa described a situation when a lesbian guest did not want to touch phallic-shaped toys and how that situation impacted her later decision-making about lesbian parties:
I remember clearly, there was one woman; she was not going to touch anything that was phallic shaped. It was like, “No, I don’t want any part of this.” “Oh.” You know, I didn’t know! I was like, “Oh, ok.” So she was more interested in the bullet [a clitoral vibrator]. So I think if I had another party where it was all lesbian, I would try to find out “Are the women not comfortable with the phallic? Do you want more just bullets and curved toys, or do they want toys, you know, that they can insert?”

Though Nyssa indicated that she would want to find out what kind of products her lesbian guests were interested in seeing demonstrated, it is unclear how she would find out that information. Consultants who wanted this type of information often had to rely on the judgment of the hostesses (who often relied on stereotypes about lesbian sexual practices when advising consultants) or by generalizing from past experiences with lesbian guests. Fine’s (2011:151) study of lesbian attendees of sex toy parties illustrated a similar finding: consultants often “made an effort to be inclusive…[but] went so far as to make conjectures about [guests’] sexual preferences. These conjectures were attempts, based on the saleswoman’s perceptions, to promote as many products as possible.” Emma discussed the problems with this approach when she told me during our interview that hostesses were often wrong when they tried to determine what their lesbian friends would purchase: “They’re like, ‘Oh, you need to [bring], like, three of the, the strap-ons.’ And so I go and buy or will find three of them [from other consultants], and I come and they don’t want anything to do with that.” Consultants’ assumptions about lesbian sexual practices were often incorrect, as Joy discussed during our interview:

It was really surprising at the party with the lesbians, they’re buying c-rings and I was…and they were coming in together as a partner, and I’m going, “Oh! Ok, to put on the strap on, now I get it.” But at that point it’s like, why not just have a man, you know what I’m saying?

Joy’s comment illustrated not only how assumptions about sexual practices that guests engaged in could be incorrect, but her final comment (“But at that point, it’s like, why not just have a man?”) also is indicative of lesbophobic/homophobic attitudes. Lesbophobic/homophobic
comments like the one Joy made were extremely rare during my interviews, but it did illustrate an additional point: consultants, and their companies, often took a very heterosexist and male-orientated view on sexual activity. Penetration is what “counts” as sex (in particular, penetration by a penis); if a woman wants to be vaginally penetrated, then she might as well have intercourse with men. This perspective was also demonstrated in my interview with Ria:

I had a, um, a gay woman ask me, when she [had] seen all the toys, she was like, “Do you have anything for gay women?” I’m like, “Order edible stuff. What are you going to do as a gay woman?” I said “We have strap-ons if you like that. Even a vibrating one.” How much more you going to do? There’s only so much you can do as a gay woman.

Although Ria went on to discuss how she tried to educate this guest about the fact that women’s bodies have a variety of erogenous zones, her initial statement (“There’s only so much you can do as a gay woman”) not only contradicted her later advice to the guest, but it also illustrated her lack of understanding of the wide variety of sexual practices lesbians can and do engage in and her presumptions about what “counts” as sex. In addition, Ria’s demonstration was similar to others in the level of assumed heterosexuality and the invisibility of lesbians; it is possible that after witnessing a demonstration that excluded her experiences and privileged those of heterosexual women, the guest simply wanted to know if the products were appropriate for lesbian women.

In addition to eliminating some products from the demonstration, consultants often made a concerted effort to include products that they thought would be appealing to lesbian and bisexual women. This usually included strap-on dildos and double-headed dildos. The fact that consultants believed that lesbian and bisexual women would naturally be drawn toward penetrative sex with phallic-like objects reinforced the heterosexist notion that women “naturally” desire penetrative sex. Nyssa discussed this during our interview:
I’ll show more of the products that are made for women. And then we have a couple of products that are made for two women. Like, we have the strap-on and the double-header. I normally don’t demo those unless someone tells me that there’s gonna be gay or bisexual women at the party.

Nearly all of the products that are demonstrated at the parties are “for women,” (though, the implication was that “woman” meant “heterosexual woman”), and it became clear from Nyssa’s comment that those products that were “for two women” are markedly different than those that were designed to be used by heterosexual women, by virtue of the fact that she would not normally demonstrate those products to a heterosexual audience. The fact that consultants determined that some products were “for two women” also seemed to eliminate them as products that heterosexual women would or could use with their male partners. As the earlier example from Carolyn’s part demonstrated, there was debate among the guests about whether or not a heterosexual couple could use a strap-on. Daphne was one of the few consultants who said that she made a concerted effort not to make assumptions about any guest’s sexual practices:

And there’s things in the catalog that I [always] touch on. I mean I always say, “Ok, here’s these [products] and some of us may use them, some of us may not.” Because, let’s face it, just because it’s a straight couple, doesn’t mean that they’re not going to use a strap on. That’s just, it depends on how you roll.

Consultants’ assumptions about the products that queer women would use demonstrated the lack of knowledge in the broader culture about the sexual practices that lesbians engage in. In addition, these assumptions demonstrated the heteronormative nature of sex toy parties; not only were lesbian women invisible in the audience (unless consultants were told otherwise), but when their experiences were discussed, those experiences seemed to be based on stereotypes and heterosexist perspectives on sex.
That Kinda Makes Me Feel Like [I’m Telling The Guest], “Because You’re A Lesbian, You’re Not Important”: Introspection On Heterosexism And Heteronormativity

The presence of lesbian guests sometimes forced consultants to confront the idea that the products they sold were heterosexist. When queer guests specifically told consultants that they were having trouble finding products that were desirable to them or told consultants that the products being demonstrated were not the kind of products they were interested in, consultants sometimes had to expand their understanding of nonheterosexual sexual practices and whether or not they or their company were engaging in heterosexist practices. These “teachable moments” with customers occasionally led consultants to genuinely question the impact of their (and their company’s) assumptions on their queer guests. Alicia illustrated this introspection and “lesson learning” during our interview when I asked what areas she would improve upon, especially in terms of the products available to guests:

Um, I guess the lesbian toys. I [had to say that to customers] so many times, “I’m sorry ladies; I don’t have anything for you.” [She shows me the catalog page where the double-headed dildo and the strap-on are featured]. You know, um, ‘cuz like this page…I mean you see there’s four products. You’re kind of limited on, if you don’t want anything that looks like a penis… well, you’re out, you know, you’re screwed. You’re out.

[Alicia related the story about the lesbian couple that she did not realize were a couple ordering and telling her “There’s nothing in here for us.”]

And I thought, “Hmm, well, what do I do now? What do I suggest to you now?” And I didn’t really have anything. I think they ended up buying lube or something, because there was nothing for them. And then I thought, “Ok, what am I gonna do if this happens again?” . . . I didn’t really want go there and say, “You know, I don’t have anything for you,” ‘cuz in a way, that kinda makes me feel like [I’m telling the guest], “Because you’re a lesbian, you’re not important, you shouldn’t be having sex.” . . . I don’t want anyone to look at me and say, “Oh, she’s a homophobe,” because that’s so far from who I am. . . . I don’t want you coming to a party in your girlfriend’s home thinking that you’re gonna have a good time and then me saying something that pisses you off or makes you feel like I’m just sittin’ there, like “I don’t like all these lesbians sitting there in the front.”
After repeated interactions with lesbian and bisexual guests, Alicia became aware of the heterosexist assumptions that she and her company were making. These interactions drove Alicia to be thoughtful about how she presented products to her lesbian guests, and made her more aware of the effect that assumptions about heterosexuality and the erasure of lesbians at sex toy parties could have on her guests, her reputation as a consultant (especially if they perceived their exclusion as based in homophobia), and her sales. From our interview, it seemed that Alicia had had more interactions with queer guests than most of the other consultants, and she was by far the most introspective about the role her business played in perpetuating ideas about heteronormativity. It is hard to know if other consultants would have increased sensitivity to issues of heterosexism and heteronormativity in their demonstrations and increased awareness about the assumptions they made about the presence and/or absence of lesbians at their parties if they had increased exposure to queer guests. Certainly, heterosexism and heteronormativity could be addressed at the corporate level or during consultant training, though it is unclear whether companies would be interested or willing to undertake that kind of inclusive training or, if Fine (2011) is correct, whether they would take a “capitalist stance on enforcing compulsory heterosexuality.”

Consultants relied on heteronormative and traditional views of gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation in order to develop the boundaries of the sex toy party frame, to bond the women together, and to create a comfortable environment within which disclosures of private information were deemed acceptable. Consultants used a variety of other ways to construct the boundaries of the sex toy party frame, including manipulating time and space.
BLOCKS OF TIME: PERIODIZATION AND SOCIAL MEANINGS OF TIMING

How we divide time—both the periodization of time (how we measure and divide continuous streams of time) and the social meanings that time, timing, and duration have—is informed by our social groups and thought communities. Time, of course, is a continuum; the divisions that we construct between times (Saturday vs. Sunday; childhood vs. adolescence; on-time and tardy) are not naturally occurring. These constructions have social meaning; in fact, “people practically manipulate time as a virtual code through which they manage to convey many important social messages without having to articulate them verbally” (Zerubavel 1987:344). This “unspoken” code conveys to others how important activities are and how important we believe our own time and the time of others to be. Zerubavel (1987) distinguished between “positive stretches of time” (time spent doing something we enjoy) and “negative stretches of time” (time spent doing thing we do not enjoy). The focus of the following sections is how sex toy party consultants constructed and manipulated positive stretches of time at the parties, and how they dealt with negative stretches of time; primarily, waiting. This section concludes with an analysis of the power dynamics at sex toy parties; specifically, how making others wait conveyed social meaning and power to both guests and consultants. This analysis is important because it examines how power dynamics at sex toy parties are constructed and maintained. In addition, an analysis of the social construction of time and space is essential for our understanding of how consultants created a recognizable sex toy party frame by manipulating cultural frameworks that were familiar to guests (e.g., relying on a “romantic evening” framework, and emphasizing the non-erotic uses for products) to create a new framework within which discussions of private sexual information were deemed acceptable.
“Positive Stretches of Time” and Social Meaning

“Positive stretches of time,” according to Zerubavel (1987:344), are generally associated with “high priority and importance.” Zerubavel (1987) argued that the duration of an event and the amount of time spent engaging in an event is often indicative of the importance we place on that event (or the people we are spending time with). The amount of time spent on an activity often conveys its importance to us (hence, why we often let our superiors speak more in a conversation, and why we prioritize our responsibilities and obligations based on how committed we are to those organizations, spending the most time with the organizations we care most about). This symbolic importance could be seen in what the consultants chose to leave out of their demonstration and what they chose to emphasize. Because most of the sex toy party companies sell dozens, if not hundreds, of products, consultants must make decisions about what should be shown and what can be “skipped” if their time is running short or if the guests appear to be no longer mentally engaged in the party. Given the wide variety of products (and their various scents and flavors), there are a near-infinite number of possible combinations in which consultants could have constructed their demonstrations. But the consultants that I interviewed and observed did not organize their parties at random; instead, nearly all of the consultants—whether at the beginning of their career or not—followed a very specific system of classification.

“Getting Ready for the Main Event”: Framing the Party

Most of the parties that I observed adhered to a very specific pre-existing framework that I call “preparing for a romantic evening.” Many consultants (and indeed, many of the companies’ catalogs) followed an order, that, it was assumed, “made sense” to the party guests. According to this framework, there are products that are suitable for “stage one” (preparation for the evening), for “stage two” (arousal/foreplay), and for “stage three” (intercourse) and these products are
bounded by the stage for which they are designed. This framework was almost universally acknowledged among the consultants that I interviewed as being the most “logical” way to present the products. In fact, it was the way that most of the companies organized their catalogs. Consultants depended on this framework to not only shape the order of their demonstration, but also to make guests comfortable with the products discussed. When guests were comfortable, it increased the likelihood that they would accept the sex toy party frame and the disclosures that occurred within it.

One must consider the cognitive act of classification when trying to understand the “romantic evening” framework. How the consultants classify which products are contained within each stage is an example of what Zerubavel called a “rigid” mindset (1991). A rigid mindset is marked by the “commitment to the mutual exclusivity of mental entities” wherein a “mental object can belong to no more than one category” (Zerubavel 1991:34). By rigidly separating these “mental objects” from one another, cultures that adhere to a rigid mindset develop strict boundaries around each object, further reinforcing their separateness and difference. Claire discussed the different categories of the products, the “romantic evening” framework, and how it influenced her demonstration, during our interview.

And I’ll ask them, you know, if you’re anticipating a romantic evening, “What are you gonna do first?” They’ll say, “Gonna take a bath, I’m probably gonna shave.” So, then I say, “Go back to page five” [in the catalog], then I tell them about the [shaving cream and body oils]. And then I’ll ask them, “Ok, well, what’s the next thing you’re gonna do?” So it’s like the romantic evening demo kind of thing. “What are you gonna do next?” “Probably gonna make my bed up,” you know, “probably gonna fold the sheets. Probably gonna change the sheets.” Whatever. We talk about [scented fabric spray], ok. And then, say, “Ok, now that you’ve gotten yourself prepared, and the bedroom prepared, you know, these are items that you’re doing that are adding to your arousal.” Just, believe it or not, it’s foreplay. He doesn’t even have to be there. You know, but women are more like Crock Pots and men are more like microwaves, and so we need a little extra time to anticipate what’s gonna happen later on in the evening. Blood flow happens, brain signals happen, so that the right areas are primed, so to speak. So then I say, you know, “Let’s talk a little bit about arousal. Foreplay brings about arousal.” And we talk about different
things like the five sexual response cycles. I talk a little bit about the products that go with those cycles. . .

Claire’s statement exemplified the romantic evening framework that was extremely common at parties. Claire used this “romantic evening” framework because it is something that most of her guests were familiar with, even if it was not a practice that they regularly engaged in. According to this framework, there are various stages of “preparation” that women go through before having a “romantic” evening: they engage in beautification rituals (showering, shaving, applying make-up and perfume); they prepare the “stage” for the evening’s activities (changing sheets, making the bed); they engage in a variety of foreplay activities (including massage, erotic games, arousal creams, and flavored lubricants); and, finally, they engage in intercourse. These “preparations” for a sexual encounter are, of course, highly gendered. The guests understood that women engaged in these preparations but that it was unlikely that their male partners would undergo similar preparations. In fact, Claire said that these preparations were a kind of foreplay for women; women needed the extra “anticipation time” in order to be adequately aroused for sexual activity.

Anna said during her interview that the order in which she did her parties simply “makes sense” to her, largely because it relied upon this well-understood framework. In addition, Anna illustrated a common theme in the interviews and during the parties I observed: penile-vaginal intercourse was regarded as the “main event” or culmination of a romantic evening.

It just makes sense to me. Like, I always start with, the um, massage products, and the shave, the shave gel, I don’t know, I just, it kind of just seems logical to me. Like I always talk, you know, talk about, you know, we’re gonna go from the massage and the bath and bod-, the bath and body products, to then the foreplay products, and then the games, and then I go to the lubes and like gettin’ them ready for the main event is what I say, and then we take the break and then we get to go with the toys.
Daphne reiterated this during her interview, when she described the order of the products that she demonstrated, and why she intended to leave the order of her demonstration unchanged: “I do them in order, because that leads them up to...it’s kinda like sex, you know, you’re leading up to the good stuff.” The framework presented by the consultants usually went unquestioned by guests, but occasionally a guest would present a challenge to this narrative.

While she discussed a lubricant designed for oral sex, Carolyn said that “Many people engage in oral favors before sexual activity,” and a guest asked (perhaps rhetorically), “Is oral sex not sex?” Carolyn did not respond to the question, but the guest posed a real challenge to the periodization of the party: what acts fell into which part of the framework, and whether the demarcation between the stages of a party (and the “stages” of a sexual encounter) were as clear-cut as the consultant presented.

The amount of time spent in each “stage” varied, largely based on the number of guests and how interactive they were with the consultant—and how closely they were paying attention at a given stage. But nearly every party I observed followed this framework of preparation, foreplay/arousal, and the “main event.” Of course, the obvious problem with the use of this frame was that not only was it culturally bound, but it reaffirmed gendered notions of arousal and sex wherein women have low levels of arousal and desire—hence the need to “prepare” for sex—and men do not. Still, when one considers all of the products being sold by a given company, relatively little time is being spent on the “toy” portion of the catalog. But the transition to the toy portion of the demonstration was marked by clear boundaries.

In addition to the “romantic evening framework,” consultants and guests also divided the party into those products that were explicitly sexual and/or erotic and those that could be “ordinary” or “non-erotic” products. For example, many of the products at the beginning of the
demonstration (make-up, bath products) were not sexual at all, but took on a sexual aura because of their presence at a sex toy party and because they were being included in the “romantic evening” frame. As the party progressed, the products became more explicitly erotic, but the consultants often attempted to defuse the eroticism of the products by discussing how they could be used in non-erotic settings. These attempts to de-eroticize products also aids in our understanding of the sex toy party frame, because it illustrated to guests that even those products that were usually regarded as explicitly sexual in nature (e.g., lubricant) could have non-erotic uses. This demonstrated to the guests that if products could be discussed within the sex toy party frame (that is, straddling the boundary between pornographic and medical/informational presentations), then disclosures of private information could fall within the sex toy party frame as well.

During her party, Britney discussed the non-erotic uses of many of the products: silicone lubricant could be used to prevent inner-thigh chafing in the summer, and lubricant containing Benzocaine (designed to desensitize the anus before anal sex) could be used to numb skin before a woman goes in to have waxing done. Jillian discussed the multiple uses of products during our interview:

As far as, let’s say, a lubricant goes, you know, you can use it for yourself, or some women just experience uncomfortable vaginal dryness and they need to have something like that to be comfortable throughout the day. You know, it’s not just, you know, a sex thing. So I would just more focus on the [non-erotic] utility of the product. [Although] I really don’t think anyone’s gonna be sitting around with company over and pull out a big dildo to use as a back massager, so (laugh). I mean there’s not much other utility there.

As Jillian acknowledged, there was a point at which there became fewer and fewer “non-erotic” uses for the products. Toys (especially those that combine vaginal penetration and clitoral stimulation, commonly called dual-action toys) were unlikely to be re-framed in a non-sexual way, primarily because it was questionable whether guests would accept such a re-framing.
Instead, toys were framed as being used by couples rather than by individuals alone (“couple’s toys”), thereby fitting into the “romantic evening” framework that had been previously established. Of course, the “eroticness” of a given product was closely tied to the symbolism of that product in American culture. Interestingly, in recent product launches, products themselves have taken on a less-erotic design; clitoral vibrators that look like lipstick, tuning forks, and necklaces have been debuted. This re-framing and de-eroticization of products served to reinforce the notion that discussions of sexuality and sexual practices did not have to be either raunchy or devoid of personal details; instead, these disclosures (like the products) could be discussed in measured terms that did not offend or alienate others.

Another important way that consultants gave meaning to portions of time during the party was through the use of breaks and by demonstrating products out of their traditional order. Demonstrating a product “out of order” (or creating a distinct category for a particular product) allowed consultants to emphasize its importance by clearly demarcating that it was separate and distinct from the rest of the products being demonstrated. Nyssa and Claire illustrated this during their interviews, and it was a technique that was common during the parties.

Nyssa: It’s like the bath and beauty comes first, then the massage items, then the foreplay, the lubricants, toys, then I talk about the toy cleaner. I talk about that completely separate because I want them to know how important it is.

* * *

Claire: And then I talk to ‘em about the toys, I say, “First thing we’re gonna do, go to page [number]” and talk about the cleaner, first, so they’re listening.

For both Nyssa and Claire, demonstrating the toy cleaner was an important part of the party—so important that they felt the need to break the “flow” of the demonstration in order to discuss it with guests. This emphasized the importance of the product for guests, especially given the fact that this occurred right before the “main event” of the party: the toy demonstration.
Consultants sometimes gave guests breaks during the party, which allowed for a clear demarcation between one stage of the party (usually, the “mild” non-erotic products) and the subsequent stage (the “wild” or erotic products). The break (when it was given) usually came immediately after the consultant discussed lubricants and arousal creams, but before the consultant discussed the toys. The breaks could be as long as 10 minutes or as short as a minute, depending on the desires of the consultant and her guests. As Zerubavel (1991:10) acknowledged, “temporal boundaries often represent mental partitions and thus serve to divide more than just time. For example, when we create special ‘holy days,’ we clearly use time to concretize the mental contrast between the sacred and the profane.” Using the separation of the “non-erotic” portion of the party from the “erotic” portion of the party reified this mental schema of classification for both guests and consultants. This separation of the “erotic” from the “non-erotic” was also reflected in the ways that consultants transported their products to and from parties. Over the course of my observations, I saw dozens of different organizational systems being employed by consultants. Some used separate bags to keep the “mild” end of the demonstration separate from the “wild” end; others used tiered drawer organizers or toolboxes, keeping the “mild” items together on one tier and the “wild” items on another; still others kept “mild items” in bags or boxes and kept the toys in gun cases (which allowed for jokes: “We’ll take a break, and then I’ll bring out the big guns,” or “Don’t worry, ladies: I brought the heavy artillery”).

Part of the reason that consultants engaged in this classification system was because the guests encouraged it. From the consultants’ perspective, the guests were “really” there to see the toys. Numerous consultants illustrated this point:

Jillian: I’ve been considering either moving [the toys] to like the middle of my presentation. . .but then again, at the end, it’s. . .it adds an element, its fun. Like that’s the
fun part for them. They’re in there, they’re anticipating when the sex toys are gonna come out, so. . .

* * *

Lexi: I know I’ve had some people that just, maybe they don’t even care about the front part of the catalogue, they just want to see the back part of the catalogue, you know, they want to see all the toys. They’re like, “Uh, yeah, I don’t need any of that stuff, just get to the good stuff.”

This anticipation for the toys could lead guests to be disappointed if they did not get to see the “final act.” Most of the companies offered “mild parties,” which would not include any toys. Although some consultants had done mild parties, the majority had not. When asked why, they cited the notion that guests expected the “final act” and were disappointed if it didn’t happen. Tavia related an instance of this disappointment during our interview:

Tavia: It was an older, it was older clients. They had to be about in [their] 60s and they [were] a little bit nervous. The hostess she had been nervous about having toys there, but the crazy part is, afterwards the older women were asking like, “So, cut the bullshit. . . where’s the toys?” (laugh).

Interviewer: So it was the hostess who thought her guests wouldn’t be comfortable with [the toys] and the guests turned out to be like, “Bring it?”

Tavia: Yeah, like “Where are the toys?” Like, “I know you got toys.”

Kendra related a similar experience:

I went to a party with the intention that it was mild. They called me and said, “It’s a bridal shower, the bride is a virgin, I don’t want to show her all those toys, they’re very religious,” and I was like “Ok.” So I tailored all of my demo towards no toys, I didn’t even unpack them, and I. . .the girls weren’t timid. They’re like “Where are the toys?”

Even if guests did not intend to buy a toy, the fact that they were willing to wait through the entire party process—mingling with other guests, eating, drinking, playing games, and participating and sitting through the “mild” portion of the demonstration—in order to see the toys indicated how important the toy demonstration was (and possibly, fear relating to violating the social norm about leaving parties early). Schwartz (1974) argued that the value of an object is
partially determined by the amount of time one invests in acquiring it; something becomes more valuable the longer we wait for it. Indeed, “services to which we have immediate access—which we can acquire without waiting—are of relatively little value to us” (1974:857). This waiting has limits, of course; if a customer decides that the desired object cannot be obtained, s/he may give up and remove themselves from the queue. Claire and Carolyn illustrated how guests were willing to wait for the most-desired party of the party (the toy demonstration):

Claire: Some girls, they wait, wait, wait, wait, wait for the toys, ‘cuz that’s all they want to see.

* * *

Carolyn: It’s kind of the reward for sitting through the show. And then it also keeps girls from leaving early, ‘cuz if you show the toys first, they want to place an order and then take off. And too, it’s kind of, it builds up to that, because the products that you’re trying to sell with them, you kind of want to show them ahead of time because you tend to lose ’em after you show the toys (laugh), so.

Interviewer: It’s kind of the main event for a lot of people?

Carolyn: It’s kind of like the, you know. . .and too, that’s really what the parties are supposed to be about. So if you’re showin’ up late or you’re comin’ in and you can’t get there on time, you haven’t missed the main reason you came. So I mean you missed a few lotions and a few lubes, it’s not that big of a deal, but if you’re there to see the toys, you don’t want to miss the demo, so.

From Carolyn’s perspective, the guests were not attending the party to see the “mild” items (even if those items were her best sellers). In fact, the “final act” of the party—the toy demonstration—was viewed as the “reward” for the guests who “sat through” through the rest of the show, even though they were ostensibly not interested in the products during that portion of the demonstration. In fact, the excerpt from Carolyn’s interview illustrates the idea that the consultants were taking their cues from the guests as to how they organize the demonstration; for her guests, the toys were what the party was “about,” and so Carolyn felt that if she did the toy
demonstration first, the guests would simply order and leave, and those that would stay for the remainder of the demonstration would be distracted.

Another interesting element of this excerpt from Carolyn’s interview was what she alluded to at the end—that guests were often late and could significantly delay the party. The following section discusses the important power dynamic that “waiting” could create at sex toy parties and how these power dynamics could impact the construction and maintenance of the sex toy party frame.

“Are They Fashionably Late?”: “Negative Stretches of Time” and Waiting

Positive stretches of time at sex toy parties were very important; the order in which products were shown could determine whether guests stayed for the entirety of the party, or if they left disappointed. Relying on the familiar cultural framework of the “romantic evening” allowed both the consultants and guests to make sense of the products being shown and to understand their general use. Consultants also had to be acutely aware of what Zerubavel (1987) referred to as “negative stretches of time;” in particular, the act of “waiting” or “being made to wait.” Waiting is “normally associated with worthlessness, and making others wait is often regarded as a symbolic display of degradation. The longer we make them wait. . .[conveys] a lesser degree of respect toward them” (1987:344). Consultants, in other words, wanted to avoid disrespecting the guests or hostess (or even the perception that they were being disrespectful), and they did this (in part) by managing stretches of “negative time.”

Large quantities of time were spent waiting at sex toy parties: waiting for guests to arrive; waiting for people to settle in for the demonstration; waiting for the “good stuff” during the demonstration; waiting for the ordering process to begin; waiting for the ordering process to be completed so the consultant could leave. Waiting, as Schwartz (1974) and Zerubavel (1987)
wrote, is as much about power and exchange as it is about manners and etiquette. Those who have the ability to make people wait—or demand that they receive immediate attention—are often in positions of power. What is interesting about sex toy parties was that this dynamic of power shifted back and forth between the hostess, the guests, and the consultants over the course of the party.

In the initial stages of the party-planning, the power dynamic between the hostess and the consultant regarding the timing of the party varied depending on the consultant’s level of success in the business. If the consultant was in great demand or very successful at her business, hostesses may have had to wait several weeks in order to have their party with her. If the consultant was just starting out in the business—when the consultant’s biggest challenge was booking parties—the consultant was much more at the whim of the hostess. Still, the consultants attempted to wield a little power in this relationship, regardless of their success in the business.

Most of the consultants that I interviewed talked with their hostesses about the timeliness of their guests and the promptness of the party. Ever mindful of the relationships between power and timeliness, many of them strategized about how to create timely arrivals, often manipulating the start-time of parties in an attempt to have the party start “on time.” This often included adjusting the “start time” of the party as it appeared on the invitation to guests (i.e., stating the party started at 6:30 when the intended start time was 7:00).

Other consultants used a similar technique, which I observed regularly. When booking a party, they would ask the prospective hostess whether her friends tended to be “on time” or “fashionably late.” Invariably, the hostesses would reply that her friends were generally on time, but the evidence from my observations and interviews indicates that this was rarely the case; fewer than five of the parties I observed started within 20 minutes of their planned start time, and
many of them started more than an hour late. This near-universal tardiness illustrates how important the roles of the guests, hostesses, and consultants were, and how much of the dynamic of the party was tied up in these roles rather than in the personalities of the individuals. As Schwartz (1974:844) said, “the capacity to make others wait is a property of roles and not their incumbents.” That is, it was not a particular “type” of guest that was late, or a particular “type” of consultant whose parties started late. Within the dynamic of the sex toy party—at least at the beginning of the party—the guests wielded most of the power of constructing and controlling time by virtue of the fact that consultants generally did not want to do a party with few (or no) guests. In this instance, “power. . .may be defined as the capacity of an individual, or a group of individuals, to modify the conduct of other individuals or groups in the manner which he [or she] desires, and to prevent his [or her] own conduct being modified in the manner in which he [or she] does not” (Schwartz 1974:848, emphasis in original). The consultants were dependent on the guests for income, and the guests knew it; they believed that the consultant would wait for them to arrive, mingle with their friends, fill their plates, and get seated. Despite the fact that in the beginning stages of the party, the consultant had the least amount of power to determine the course of the evening’s events, there were other ways that they attempted to gain control and power through manipulating time and punctuality at parties. If consultants attempted to wrest control of the timing of the party away from hostesses or the guests, they risked damaging their presentation of self, the construction of the sex toy party frame (especially since beginning the party before most guests had arrived meant that those guests would miss the critical first stages of the party and the development of the sex toy party frame), and ultimately their sales.

One of the ways that consultants attempted to manipulate time—especially the “starting time” of parties—was based on what time they arrived at the hostesses’ home. There was
considerable difference between the consultants that I interviewed about what the appropriate timing of their arrival was, and most consultants took one of two possible perspectives. The first, “early arrival,” is typified by Carolyn’s statements during her interview:

I, me personally, I used to show up 30 minutes early for every party, and I would sit there for about 45 [minutes], so as I’ve learned in the process. . .I usually still show up about 10 to 15 minutes early. Just because if I tell my hostess that the party starts at 7:00 and I show up at 7:00, to me, that’s disrespectful to the hostess. That, you know, I’m gonna walk in the door and there may be some guests there. . .and I do tend to sit there for about 15 or 20 minutes. . .You know, when I’m there, then she knows regardless of whoever else shows up, the party’s on. So I try to be there at least 15 minutes early, just to let it, rest assure that, you know, what she’s doing is worthwhile, we’re havin’ a party if it’s me and her (laugh).

From Carolyn’s perspective, showing up early—before the party was scheduled to begin—was showing respect for the hostess and her time. In addition, arriving early indicated to the hostess that the “show will go on,” even if it was a small party. Showing the hostess that “what she’s doing is worthwhile” was an important part of showing respect to the hostess and any guests that may already be in attendance. This perspective is in line with what Schwartz called “the respect pattern, which inclines persons to arrive a little early for meetings and rendezvous so as not to subject another or others to such inconvenience and abasement. . .” (1974:865-866). Many of the consultants I observed and interviewed said that they took this perspective and that they would always try to arrive at a hostess’ home before the party was scheduled to begin. The second perspective that consultants used, “on-time arrival,” was also quite common. In an attempt to avoid the delays that often accompanied waiting for guests to arrive, mingle, and settle in for the demonstration, many consultants said that they would arrive when the party was scheduled to begin (i.e., arriving at 7:00 pm for a party that started at 7:00 pm, rather than at 6:30 or 6:45, as the “early arrival” approach would dictate).
Almost all of the consultants acknowledged that they would end up waiting for a party to start; it was viewed as inevitable. Even when consultants used the “on-time arrival” technique, they still ended up waiting for guests to arrive and for hostesses to initiate the party. In fact, much of the punctuality of the party depended on the hostess and whether or not she wanted to continue to wait for tardy guests, as Melinda discussed during our interview:

My hostess is my priority, and if she has six friends that she really wants to see that aren’t here yet, I don’t mind waiting. It’s ok. My night is hers. I have nothing else until I go to bed. For me to rush her and make her feel pressured and bad because they aren’t there, that’s not fair to her. It’s not her fault. . .And it’s funny from your perspective, I bet you’re there going, “Why are you not starting? I don’t understand why you guys are waiting.” My view of that is we wait for the hostess. She’s the most important person there. If she says, “Let’s wait an hour,” you know what? As long as everybody else in the room is ok with that, I’m ok with that.

This quote from Melinda exemplified the conundrum that many of the consultants faced: while they might view being made to wait as rude and/or disrespectful of their time, they also viewed pushing the hostess to start the party before all of her guests had arrived or before she was ready to start as rude or disrespectful. Thus, at this point in the party, the hostess wielded the most power. Even though many of the consultants expressed to me that their “time is money” and that they were reluctant to “waste time” at parties (especially at those parties with low or no sales), I never saw a consultant express this to the hostess. The consultants viewed their time as valuable, and late evening start times and long commutes to party locations added to their frustration, especially when it took away from familial or care-giving responsibilities. Melinda illustrated this during her interview, when she discussed the consequences for her when parties started late:

Lately, what I have found is my girls that for some reason, 7:00 doesn’t mean 7:00 to women, and what was happening was I was leaving my house at 5:30 to get there at 6:30 to be ready at 7:00, you know, I’m leavin’ my kids home by themselves, I haven’t fed them yet. So I started changing it more for them, because if my party’s at 7:00 and it’s an hour away, I’m gonna get there at 6:45, because I can bet money they’re not gonna be
there at 7:00. I’m getting to a point where I’m trying to get home at 1:00 and 12:30 am and my time is valuable and it’s not fair. And I’m gonna start telling my hostesses that somehow.

Rather than emphasizing their personal experience of disrespect and/or rudeness at the prospect of waiting, it was far more likely for consultants to encourage the hostess to consider the other guests when trying to “get started.” More often than not, consultants used “event time,” which uses group consensus rather than time to determine when activities began and ended (Levine 1997). Consultants relied on body language and non-verbal cues from the other guests to determine when the party would start, rather than using a specific clock-time. Marie discussed her use of “event time” during our interview:

If I have people, if everybody’s mixing and mingling. . .again, it’s all just about reading the crowd. And if people are mixing and mingling in the kitchen, and they’re havin’ a good time, and they don’t mind waiting for the couple people, I’m not gonna be the one that says, “Ok, that’s it.” But if people are starting to gather around the table, they’re starting to flip through the catalog and they’re like, “Pffft.” And you know, you can just kind of tell that they’re. . .they’re like, “Look, I was here on time, I’m ready to go” then I’ll just let the hostess know, “You know, some of your guests have been waiting for a while, they’re kind of ready to go. Let me go ahead and start my presentation and then for everybody that comes in late, I’ll get them caught up.” Sometimes I do, sometimes I don’t, it depends on, you know, how it goes. . .So yeah, if people are starting to like sit in the living room and look at me like. . .

Interviewer: Yeah, “Let’s go.”

Marie: Then I’ll just let the hostess know, “Look, I’m really sorry, but people seem like they want to get going. Why don’t we get started. . ..”

Another important aspect of the manipulation of time at the parties was managing the amount of time guests were kept waiting. As Marie’s interview above and Melinda’s below indicated, using “event time” could be quite perplexing (and frustrating) those who were used to employing “clock time” to determine when things begin and end (Levine 1997). Melinda elaborated on the challenges of using event time, rather than clock time, to determine when parties should start:
My rule is one hour, because if at 8:00, if the party started at 7:00, your girls aren’t ready? I let her know, “You know what, we’re gonna go and get started with the intro and a fun games, as they come in we will catch them up later,” ‘cuz what’s happening is she’s taking advantage of your time. You give her the whole night, but what she doesn’t realize is that there are people that got there on time, and it’s not fair to them to have to wait an hour and a half just because somebody else couldn’t make it.

Sometimes the girls plan to come an hour and a half late so they don’t have to see the liquid line or so that they don’t have to see the party. In their minds they’re thinking, “If I get there after, I can just hang out.” So, maybe they’re late on purpose.

Guests were willing to wait, but only for so long; and it was in the consultant’s best interest to get the party started before the guests lost interest, left the party, or drank so much that they were disruptive during the party. As Schwartz (1974:844) pointed out, the longer a person waits for a service the greater their investment is in obtaining that service, “thereby increasing its cost and decreasing the profit derived from it.” Therefore, “persons tend not only to place a higher value on services for which they must wait; they also demand more in proportion as they wait” (Schwartz 1974:857). Consultants were aware of this, and if they waited too long to start a party, they would not be able to offer a great enough “return” on the time the guest had invested, and guests would leave disappointed. In addition, they were aware that the longer they delayed the start of the party, the more aggravated guests were likely to become and the less likely they were to place an order with the consultant. Again, though, much of the power here was possessed by the hostess and her guests; they could refuse to start the party, but in most cases when the consultant employed the “courtesy for other guests” technique, it was successful. It is also possible that when consultants waited for the guests to arrive, guests might have felt an obligation to purchase from the consultant, in particular if their late arrival meant a long delay.

“‘That’s the First Thing to Go’: Controlling the Timing of the Party”

One of the few times during which the consultant had near-total control over the timing of the party was during the actual demonstration. Although the behavior and interest-level of
guests informed her decisions, she alone determined what products would be shown, what elements of the party should be skipped, and how much time she would spend on any given element of the demonstration.

Games, which many consultants (and previous research; see Mullaney and Shope 2012) viewed as an integral part of developing comfort and excitement among the guests, were often the first element of the party to be eliminated if the party was starting late. Carolyn discussed this during her interview:

Carolyn: If...my rule of thumb when it comes to my parties is if it starts 45 minutes late, we’re not doing games. Because that’s 45 minutes of my time that I’m not going to entertain you and show you the products. If you wanted to be on time, we could have played a couple games, but, you know. And it’s not necessarily my hostess’ fault, it’s just something I tell her. And I’m like, you know, if it’s, if most of the girls are there, we’ll play a few games and then we’ll start the party, but if I’m waiting and half of them aren’t even there, we’re not doing games, ‘cuz I do need to get home (laugh). So I just kind of play them for the fun of, you know, ‘cuz a lot of girls...some of these girls only come to these parties for games (laugh). So they’re like, “What, you’re not playing games?”

During our interviews, most of the consultants distinguished between “purposive” and “non-purposive” games. In addition, I identified a third category of games—what I call “games with a hidden purpose.” Purposive games are those games that help a consultant build her business. These games usually fall into one of two categories: “booking games,” which help to entice people to book a future party with the consultant (e.g., by offering a “prize” to the winner in the form of a coupon that is redeemable only at a future party), and “recruitment games,” which help introduce audience members to the business, the benefits of being a consultant, and challenges that consultants might face in their business (e.g., by offering a prize to the guest who asked the most questions about the business). Consultants alternated between these two types, largely based on what aspects of their business they felt they needed to develop. For those who had just started their business and were primarily concerned about booking parties and
developing their pool of customers, booking games were ideal. Those who were concerned with increasing the size of their team (and subsequently, their advancement up the levels of the business) primarily played recruitment games.

Non-purposive games are those that do not serve a purpose, but are simply ice-breaker games designed to be fun and get the guests engaged with each other and the consultant. One extremely simple game is called the “I Hate Sex” game. Guests write down their least favorite household chore, and are asked to write down why they hate this chore. The consultant moves through the room, asking them to introduce themselves and complete the sentence “I hate sex because…” by stating the reason they hate the chore. Common answers I recorded in my field notes were, “I hate sex because” “It makes my fingers pruney,” “It smells,” or “I get sweaty.” These types of games serve a minor purpose for the consultant—they allow her to try to learn guests’ names—but in general they are viewed as simply a fun game used to get the group to loosen up and have fun.

The third category of games, which I identified from observing the parties and from interviews but which few of the consultants acknowledged, are games that have a hidden purpose. From what I could tell, these games were often an effective barometer of the comfort level of the guests at the party. These games usually consist of a “Mad-Libs” type of interaction. The guests are often asked to introduce themselves to the other guests using their name and a “sexy” adjective that describes them, but they must use their first initial when choosing an adjective (i.e., “My name is Tracy, and I am tasty,” or “My name is Anna, and I am amazing”). “The Celebrity Game” asks guests to suggest their favorite male celebrity, two body parts, and their favorite catchphrase, which are then inserted into a Mad-Libs-like scenario: the guest is going on vacation and can bring her favorite celebrity with her; while they’re on vacation, she
puts her [body part] on his [body part] and he says [catchphrase]. The ridiculousness of the resulting scenario (and the shared attraction to some celebrities) is the source of most of the humor. For consultants, though, the games is not just a source of humor; it is also a way for them to assess the comfort level of the guests at any particular party:

Kendra: [Games like “The Celebrity Game”] also gauge completely who your shy girls are playing. . .because when it says name a body part and then I tell them when they get to the second body part, I’m like, “Ok whatever body part you were going to put down first you wouldn’t put down, put it down.” But you get the girls that say lips and belly.

Interviewer: Right. Arm. . .

Kendra: And arm, yeah, and you’re like, you can instantly figure out who’s comfortable and who’s not comfortable based on their answers. So I do feel like that part, that game, kind of gauges like, um, it gauges it for me.

The recruiting game and The Celebrity Game were far and away the most common at the parties I observed. One (or, in some cases, both) of the games were played at almost every party I attended. Although consultants said during our interviews that they would readily eliminate games if the party started late, their statements did not match their actions; very rarely did consultants eliminate games. I attribute this to three factors. First, there was an expectation from the guests that games would be played, and consultants tried their best throughout the parties to meet expectations. As Carolyn stated in her interview, some guests attended the parties simply to play the games, and although they viewed time as a resource not to be wasted, consultants were reluctant to disappoint guests by refusing to play any games.

Second, games were used to lighten the mood, create comfort for guests, and sometimes educate them about the business. Nearly every consultant I interviewed stated that games were a critical way for them to develop an open, fun, and inviting atmosphere; in fact, those parties that I observed where no games were played were much less interactive and engaging than those parties where games were played.
Finally, most of the consultants played purposive games, which were often viewed as “adding” to the growth of their business, rather than detracting from it. These games were often employed despite the fact that the party was starting late, perhaps because the consultants viewed their inclusion as a way to “re-coup” any loses that they might incur from the party starting late. Games with a hidden purpose took relatively short amounts of time and gave the benefit of allowing the consultant to assess the comfort level of the guests prior to the party “officially” starting. In addition, guests really seemed to enjoy them. In most cases—whether it was a conscious decision or not—the consultants determined that regardless of how late the party started, the costs of cutting games outweighed the benefits.

Another important way that the consultants controlled the timing of the party was through eliminating products from the demonstration. The consultant controlled what products would be shown and which would receive in-depth and/or interactive demonstrations, and in most cases the guests were relatively unaware that they were missing anything. During my observations, consultants regularly skipped items that they had placed on their table, but they rarely skipped a whole “category” of products. For example, they may have decided on the spot to skip the demonstration for a particular lubricant, but very rarely did they skip all of the lubricants. Instead, consultants encouraged patience from guests, especially if they sensed that the guests were becoming impatient or distracted. During our interview, Melinda discussed how guests could become overly excited and disruptive once she started the toy portion of the demonstration. Guests, Melinda said, would focus more on the toy that they were passing around the room than on the one she was discussing at the front of the room:

So I tell them at that point when they come back, I’m like, “Look, I want 10 minutes of uninterrupted time. I’ve not asked for that yet. If you can give me that, I promise you I’ll have you in and out of here in the next 30 minutes.” And they’re like, “done,” ’cuz they’re already an hour in.
Similarly, Marie stated in our interview that the time that she spent with her guests was “precious” and she acknowledged that she had a limited amount of time in which she could capture and hold their attention; in that time, she said, she tried to create as big an impact as possible.

Marie: I don’t want to waste...you know, really, when you’re doing your demo, you know, and they say, “Don’t let it run over an hour,” but even like throughout that hour, it’s not like they’re all glued to their chairs and staring at you, so your time with them is precious, and so I’m not gonna waste time selling something, you know what I mean, like if I can only get their attention for five things, I’m gonna make sure that it’s five things they’re gonna be like, “whoa.”

Despite their best efforts, consultants could only control so much of the timing of the party and the level of engagement from the guests; guests could disrupt the party in any number of ways. In the worst-case scenario, the consultant had ultimate control to end the demonstration early. I never witnessed a party ending early or abruptly during my observations, but consultants related stories of drunkenness and disruptions that they felt they could not control which led them to end the demonstration early. In the following excerpt, Marie described an incident one of her recruits dealt with (specifically, guests whom she had lost control of), and she discussed the advice she gave her recruit:

Marie: Like if you really lost them...[new recruits] say, “They talked too much and they wouldn’t pay attention so it took me three hours to get through my demo.” And I’m like, “Really?” ‘Cuz at some point in time, you just cut your losses. You don’t go, “Well, you’re not paying attention, I’m going into the ordering room, this demo is over.” You don’t do that. But you can [say] like, “Ok ladies, I’ve got two more things and then I’m gonna wrap up,” even though you had seven or eight.

Interviewer: You just start cutting stuff without them realizing you’re cutting stuff?

Marie: Exactly. “Two more things to get through” and then, you know, you do a quick demo on them and then you head into the ordering room. Because you’re torturing them and you’re torturing yourself by pushing through if they’re really not interested. So you can definitely end your demo. You can definitely go like, “This is not working. We’re done,” but you don’t have to let them know that.
In this way, Marie counseled her recruits to control the timing of the party—in this case, when the party would end. Even in those instances where the consultant clearly had the most control—the timing and duration of the party—they often allowed the guests to maintain a “sense” of control.

The final stage of the party—the ordering room—was time-controlled by the guests. Depending on the number of guests, the kinds of questions that they had, and how long they wanted to talk to the consultant, the ordering process could take more than an hour. Guests asked the consultants a wide variety of questions pertaining to sexual health, sexual problems they were having, and relationship issues, and discussing these issues could occasionally take some time. The process of totaling orders, rendering payment, and compiling all of the products a guest ordered (especially if a guest repeatedly changed her order) also lengthened the amount of time spent in the ordering room. The guests that I observed in the ordering room in general, though, seemed very cognizant of the amount of time they spent in the ordering room, but that did not seem to be for the consultant’s benefit. Instead, guests usually seemed to be very aware that there were other people “behind” them in line, and so tried to “speed things up” for the benefits of other guests. Usually guests would complete their order, gather their purchases and exit from the ordering room yelling, “Next!” Occasionally guests would try and enter the ordering room in pairs (or more) because they believed that it would speed up the process, and guests who had been in the ordering room for longer than other guests thought was appropriate were often teased on their way out: “What, did you buy one of everything?” Interestingly, the person who wielded the most power over the course of the party—the hostess—was the last to order. This occurred not only so that other guests, who presumably did not live with the hostess, could place their orders and leave, but also because the “shopping spree” that the hostess
received as a reward for hosting the party was a proportion of the total amount her guests spent that night. The consultant, though, had very little control over the timing of the ordering room; it would be rude and/or disrespectful to cut off guests who wanted to talk to her, and she certainly would not leave without taking everyone’s order. At this stage of the party, the guests wielded the most power to control and construct time, but any concerns they seem to have about “taking up time” appeared to be generated out of concern for other guests rather than for the consultant.

Throughout the course of the party, the timing, duration, and framing of products and demonstrations were fraught with power struggles. The power that guests, hostesses and consultants wielded changed throughout the course of the party, but the guests and hostesses were consistently the most powerful people in the room. At the beginning stages of the party, the guests and hostess had the power to make the consultant wait by virtue of their tardiness or their desire to wait for other guests. Consultants had little ability to “repossess” power during this stage; to demand the party start would be a breach of etiquette that would surely have caused the guests to lose respect for the consultant. In most cases, the consultants relied upon rules of etiquette and respect about “waiting” in order to move the party to the demonstration phase.

During the actual demonstration, the consultant gained some power back because she controlled the pace of the party. She determined what products were shown and which were skipped, how much time would be spent on the non-erotic and erotic products, and when they would get “to the good stuff.” But the guests still exerted some control, as they could get up and leave at any time or disrupt the party to extent that the consultant could not continue. Even in these cases, though, the consultant yielded some power to the guests, but that power was symbolic rather than “real.” Finally, the guests and hostess re-exerted control over time resources at the end of the party; they could take up as much time as they liked in the ordering room without concern for the
consultant. Even though some guests had real issues that they wanted to discuss with the consultant, they were acutely aware that other guests were waiting for them to complete their order so they could place their own order and go home. Schwartz argued that “to be kept waiting—especially to be kept waiting an unusually long while—is to be the subject of an assertion that one’s own time (and, therefore, one’s social worth) is less valuable than the time and worth of the one who imposes the wait” (1974:856). Before the party started, tardy guests were not confronted with the concrete evidence that their lateness had on others; it was not until they arrived at the party that the abstract notion of “other guests” became real to them. Once they are at the party, though, all guests began to inhabit the same roles and so had relatively equal amounts of power. They were less likely to enact power struggles over waiting and they were generally more respectful of each other’s time than they were of the consultants’, who possessed less social power than they did.

The social construction of time and timing at sex toy parties helps us to understand how consultants developed the sex toy party frame as it was applied to disclosures of private information. Consultants relied on existing cultural frameworks of the romantic evening to help shape and guide guests’ disclosures away from the pornographic and the medical/informational, and toward a balance between the two. In addition, consultants worked to de-eroticize products, which helped to illustrate to guests that sexuality-related products, like disclosures of private sexual information, did not have be discussed either in a pornographic or raunchy way or in a dry, impersonal way. The sex toy party frame represented a middle ground, and modeling how the sex toy party frame could be applied to sexual products demonstrated how it could be applied to disclosures of private sexual information as well. Management of the timing of the party was important to setting the power dynamics of the party; if consultants were unable to maintain
some control over the timing of the party (both start times and the amount of time spent waiting),
they risked serious damage to their presentation of self as a competent businesswoman, risked
alienating guests, and called into question whether they had the kind of control that was
necessary to developing the sex toy party frame and getting guests to apply it.

CHUNKS OF SPACE AND RITUALS OF TRANSITION

Cognitive sociologists regard space similarly to how they regard time, as something that
is classified and divided up according to the needs and requirements of the social group. Like the
divisions between the days of the week (or between neighborhoods, cities, and countries), the
divisions between the spaces at sex toy parties were continuous stretches that the consultants and
guests constructed into separate and distinct universes. The distinctions between different types
of space—in the case of sex toy parties, the “socializing space,” “party space,” and the “ordering
space”—are purely mental. These “mental distinctions need to be concretized,” according to
Zerubavel (1991:7), and there were many markers that consultants and their guests used to make
the separations between the different types of space “real.” In addition, Zerubavel (1991:18)
argued that we use “rituals of transition” to mark the boundaries of these spaces. By “playing up
the act of ‘crossing’ them, we make mental discontinuities more ‘tangible.’ Many rituals, indeed,
are designed specifically to substantiate the mental segmentation of reality into discrete chunks.”
These distinctions between spaces helped to elucidate the differences between acceptable
disclosures of private information and unacceptable ones, largely by providing the consultant
with an area (the ordering room) in which guests could disclose any information they wanted
without offending or irritating other guests. This allowed guests to deflect inappropriate
disclosures away from the party and toward the ordering room, which served to reinforce the
boundaries of the sex toy party frame. Again, consultants and guests used a variety of “rituals of transition” to mark the exit of one space and the entrance of another.

**Chunks of Space**

At the beginning of the party, the guests and the consultants often gathered in a different area of the home than the party would actually take place in. Parties were almost always held in living rooms of the home (consultants told me stories of having parties in bedrooms—usually because it was a studio apartment without a separate “living room” area—though I never directly observed this), but the guests and the consultants often gathered and mingled in the kitchen or dining area before the party started. Usually, these areas were not separated with a door or a wall; they were relatively open spaces that were only made separate through the social markers that guests and consultants recognized. During this time and in this space, most people were standing and mingling with the other guests; they were eating food, having drinks, taking phone calls, and socializing while the TV was on or music played. The consultant would usually bring in her inventory and demonstration from the car, put her inventory in the ordering space, and set up her demonstration in the party space. After this was completed, she would usually join the guests where they were mingling and socializing; the area where the demonstration would be held was often empty of people, despite the fact that this meant that the “socializing space” was often quite crowded. The consultants usually mingled with the guests, something that they regarded as important for establishing a connection with the guests.

**Rituals of Transition**

When the party was finally about to begin, the first ritual of transition occurred. Usually, the consultant would begin the process by setting out catalogs and order forms on all of the seats in the “party space,” and this served as a general hint to the guests to start congregating in that
area. Occasionally, guests would individually come in to the party space and look at the products on the table, but more often the guests stayed in the “socializing space” until the hostess signaled the transition. When the hostess started to take her seat, the other guests followed suit. Though it sounds simple and “natural,” this was a complex navigation of social etiquette for everyone. After all, the hostesses were “hosting” the party; they wanted to ensure that their guests were comfortable (following proper middle-class etiquette regarding hosting a social gathering), but they also needed to be aware of the amount of time that they were keeping the consultant waiting. Because the different types of spaces indicated the acceptability of different types of disclosure, the rituals between these spaces were important boundary markers between the stages of the party, whether disclosures were deemed appropriate or inappropriate, and the sex toy party frame itself.

During the demonstration itself, there were several markers that indicated that this was a separate space from the previous “socializing space” and the yet-to-come “ordering space.” Guests generally sat down and stayed seated for the remainder of the demonstration (unless the consultant gave them a break), and the consultant stood the entire time. Guests usually had drinks but often did not have food. For the first time in the evening, the consultant was the focus of the guests’ attention, rather than their friends, the food, or the hostess. The seats in the room were often organized in a semi-circle focused on the hostess and her table of products, physically altering the space to accommodate the demonstration. These physical alterations to the room were one way that the consultants and guests “concretized” the mental distinction between the “socializing space” and the “party space” (Zerubavel 1991:7). In addition, these changes to the room demarcated the sex toy party from a “regular” party that does not focus on the sale and purchase of a product.
Another ritual of transition occurred at the end of the party when the consultant concluded the party and transitioned to the ordering room. The parties almost universally ended with the toy demonstration and the guests passing the toys around the room, which allowed them to feel the toys and test their settings. While the guests discussed the toys with each other and asked the occasional question about a product, the consultant was busy packing up her demonstration to transition to the ordering room. At this stage of the party, the consultant usually thanked the group for their time and attention, gave further instructions on filling out their order forms, and took her demonstration products with her to the ordering room. The guests would often remain in the “party space” for a while, looking over the catalog and filling out the forms, and they would often make their way back to the “socializing space” as the ordering process progressed.

Despite the fact that nearly every consultant told me during our interview that they required a “private” ordering room from their guests—preferably a bedroom with a door—approximately half of the parties I observed did not use a “private” ordering room. Cognitive sociologists would argue that there is no space that is “naturally” more private than any other space; it is only the meaning that we give to the space and the social cues we use to demarcate it as private that makes it so. As Zerubavel noted, “Even the thinnest partition (for example, a tent) serves as an insulation device and is, therefore, vital for our sense of privacy” (1991:25). These “insulation devices” abounded at sex toy parties, as did “social walls” that were erected to create a sense of privacy. When a room that was physically separate from the “party space” was not available, consultants used adjoining kitchens, dining rooms, patios, basements, entry ways, stairways, and occasionally bathrooms or their cars as “private spaces.” These spaces all varied in terms of the amount of physical separation and distance from the socializing and party spaces,
and consultants used a variety of techniques to create “social walls” and a sense of privacy in even the most open and physically penetrable of spaces (see Chapter Four).

The Importance of Transitions and Spaces

The importance of clearly demarcated spaces and transitions becomes clear when we consider those parties that lacked them. The lack of transitions from one space to the next seemed to be one of the most chaos-inducing situations consultants (and guests) faced, and much of that chaos seemed to stem from having a hostess who did not recognize the importance of the transitions (or her role in marking them). Though the lack of transitions marked these parties as different from the rest of those I observed and came in different forms, the results were quite similar.

For example, the observation I conducted of Josie’s party was in a small apartment in a low-income housing project. The hostess was having the party for her friends inside the apartment, and several men were outside barbequing. The men were either not respectful of the “no men allowed” policies of Josie’s company or had not been told about them, so they were milling around the living room and the kitchen while Josie was trying to start. Josie’s company was quite strict in their “no men allowed” policy, so every time a man entered the space, Josie had to pause the demonstration. Near the end of the party, several of the men abruptly entered the living room, effectively ending the party in the middle of the toy demonstration. In addition, there was no private ordering space at all—the living room and kitchen were connected, and Josie ended up doing the ordering in the corner of the crowded kitchen in full view of and within earshot of many of the guests. I noted in my field notes that even though Josie asked every guest if they needed or wanted more privacy, it was a “lost cause” due to the number of people in the kitchen and the remaining guests’ disregard for the establishment of a private space. In this case,
there were external factors (the presence of men) that were largely outside of Josie’s control; she had relied on the hostess to convey the rules and to reinforce the boundaries between “female” and “male” spaces and “party” and “socializing” spaces during her party. Unfortunately, the hostess of this party was often out of the “party space” during much of the party and did not seem particularly interested in Josie’s attempts to regulate space and time; there were few opportunities for Josie to convey information that might have changed the party dynamic. The party felt very disorganized, in large part because the hostess and the consultant were not on the same page about the importance of different spaces and transitions.

The lack of transitions during Josie’s party also meant that it was unclear where and when disclosures of private information were appropriate. For example, during the demonstration itself, a guest if it was possible to have orgasms that were “too intense,” because that was what she experienced with her partner when he continued to stimulate her to the point of discomfort. In addition, the guest told Josie (and all of the other guests) that her partner threw all of her toys away because he did not believe that she should use them. Josie tried to redirect the guest’s questions to the ordering room, but because it was not clear where and when that stage of the party would begin (and, when it did begin, it was not very private), the guest did not seem to be satisfied with waiting to have her question answered. During the ordering room phase, she told Josie that she “didn’t care if she embarrassed herself” during the party by asking this question because she wanted an answer. It is likely that if the different spaces—both temporal and physical—and the transitions between them had been clearly established earlier in the party, this guest might have understood the sex toy party frame better (e.g., she would have known that there was a private area set aside for those types of questions and she need not have
“embarrassed herself” in front of other guests) and whether or not her disclosure was appropriate at that stage of the party.

A similar situation happened in an upscale suburb during Daphne’s party. Similar to what occurred at Josie’s party, the hostess at Daphne’s party did not assist in the creation of boundaries and transitions between spaces. In this instance, the physical alteration of the space to include additional chairs for guests created a closed circle of seats instead of a somewhat open semi-circle. This meant that anytime a guest wanted to get up to refill her drink or get dessert, she had to cross in front of the other guests and Daphne in order to exit the circle. In this case, the hostess was preoccupied getting her guests settled as they transitioned from the socializing stage to the party stage, so she ended up in a seat on the far edge of the closed circle, furthest from the socializing area. The hostess repeatedly got up to leave the party area to refresh the guests’ drinks and dessert plates, crossing the party space and breaking up the physical space that had been created. The hostess was often absent from the party space as she did her “hosting duties,” which meant that Daphne was alone to control the crowd and reinforce the boundaries. Like in Josie’s case, Daphne’s party seemed to suffer from boundaries between spaces that were too porous; because the hostess was constantly crossing the boundaries, it was difficult for Daphne to establish the boundaries between the physical and temporal spaces and the different phases of the party. In addition, due to the physical allocation of space, Daphne could not rely on the hostess to help in the construction and maintenance of the sex toy party frame, because when the hostess left one physical space she also left the mental space that it symbolized. In this case, the sex toy party frame suffered because it was unclear to guests what stage of the party they were in and what level of disclosure was appropriate. For example, some guests used slang terms to refer to male anatomy and others did not, and those same guests were much more likely to
disclose about their use of products (especially the toys) than those who used the anatomically correct terms. These disclosures and the use of out-of-frame language seemed to cause discomfort on the part of the other guests (indicated in my field notes by the in-frame guests shushing or giving disapproving looks to those who were out of frame). I believe that this discomfort and conflict at this party was due in large part to the lack of boundary-building—in part because of the interruption of the construction by the consultant, but also because those interruptions seemed to distract Daphne from her ability to construct the frame.

In the examples from Josie and Daphne’s parties, the hostess’ involvement (or lack thereof) in the construction and maintenance of separate spaces and transitions between them became apparent. In both cases, though due to different issues, the boundaries between the stages and spaces of the parties were too porous. As noted earlier, the guests and the consultant took many of the cues about timing and space transitions from the hostess, and when she was absent (or became absent because of hosting distractions), the party suffered. Both of these parties seemed disorganized because of the lack of a clear framework to guide the process. But the hostesses do not construct the boundaries and transitions alone; they also work with the consultant to create these demarcations. In a few instances, the consultants were less engaged in the construction of the transitions, and the parties seemed to start and stop abruptly.

At Ria and Britney’s parties, the hostesses seemed willing to engage in the construction of boundaries, but the consultants were less involved in this process than at other parties I observed. Neither of these consultants engaged in the socializing that other consultants did; instead, they remained in the “party space” while the guests mingled and ate. It was unclear at the time why they chose not to mingle with the guests, but because they did not there was no opportunity to subtly signal to the hostess and guests that the transition from socializing to party
was occurring. There seemed to be a rather abrupt change from the mingling space to the party space when the hostess realized the consultant was ready to start the party. This was displayed more in Ria’s case than Britney’s, because the spaces for socializing and the party were significantly more “separate” in Ria’s case (marked by a doorway and whole walls, rather than a short hallway, as was the case at Britney’s party). The lack of transitions was furthered during Ria’s party when she played a game at the end of the party, rather than at the beginning (as most consultants did). In addition, she did not offer the guests a separate space for ordering, electing instead to have them approach the table in the living room with completed order forms. The lack of transitions led to a sense of abruptness during both of these parties. At Ria’s party, it felt like we were suddenly doing the demonstration; then we suddenly shifted to doing a game; and then the party was over. Britney did have a separate space for ordering—a bedroom on a different floor of the house—so the transition to the third space was clearer and the separation between the party space and the ordering space was highlighted when we carried her products and inventory up the stairs. The disquiet the guests and I seemed to feel when transitions were absent further reinforced how important those boundaries were to our experiences and how they hinged on agreed-upon social rules and conventions. There is no reason, for example, that the socializing, party, and ordering space couldn’t be in the same physical space; in fact, sometimes they were. But the consultants and the guests clearly perceived a difference between the spaces and the activities that would be taking place within each of them and “concretized” the difference in meaning those spaces had through the use of a variety of “insulating devices” and techniques (including playing music, eating food, and remaining standing in the socializing space but remaining seated and abandoning the snack table in the party space) (Zerubavel 1991:7, 25).
CONCLUSION

This chapter has described the various ways that consultants and guests framed sex toy parties. According to Zerubavel, “framing involves surrounding situations, acts, or objects with mental brackets that basically transform their meaning by defining them” (1991:11). Consultants and guests engaged in a variety of cognitive acts in order to “frame” a sex toy party differently from any other social experience. First, they engaged in the cognitive acts of perception and focusing when they conceived that this party was like a regular party (there is socializing, refreshments, and fun), but also different from a regular party (a product is being sold; there will be frank discussions of sexuality and sexual practices). These factors—that a product was being sold, and that sex would be discussed—meant that a different frame had to be employed than would be used for another party or another sales event. Accordingly, the consultants and the guests engaged in a wide variety of classification strategies in order to create a new frame for this experience.

Classification involves the “cutting up of the world into conventional islands of meaning” (Zerubavel 1997:54). These classifications do not occur naturally; instead, they are constructed by thought communities and social groups, and reflect those groups’ beliefs about difference and similarity. Groups are lumped together and then split apart, creating what seem to be natural divisions between the entities. Consultants and guests engaged in classification in a number of ways that have been outlined in this chapter. First, the consultant worked to create a shared sense of identity among guests by splitting men from women: literally in the sense that men were absent from the parties, and metaphorically in their discussion of men and women as different. In particular, consultants and guests separated men and women by emphasizing the supposedly “natural” and “universal” differences in men and women’s approaches to sexuality, focusing
specifically on men’s sexual drives and egoism in regards to sex. In addition, they sought to lump the guests together and form a collective identity between the guests by emphasizing the similarities between women. This was done in large part when the consultant shared her story of entering the business, something that the consultants believed allowed them to connect to the other guests through experiences of family, mothering, marriage, work, and financial difficulty. Consultants often relied on pre-existing frames that the guests could recognize (i.e., the “romantic evening” framework) in order to help the guests understand the context and the meaning of the products being demonstrated. Consultants and guests also separated portions of time and space and imbued those classifications with meaning. With regards to the classification of time, a complex negotiation of power took place at sex toy parties as the guests, hostesses, and consultants traded the power to construct and control time back and forth over the course of the parties. By attempting to manage the positive and negative stretches of time, consultants manipulated the timing and social meaning of time to best suit their needs. Finally, consultants and guests manipulated and partitioned the physical space at the parties to create separate areas that reflected their ideas about the stages of the parties and what would occur in the corresponding physical spaces. The guests, hostesses, and consultants also engaged in a number of ritualized transitions that separated one space and time from the next; when these spaces were not clearly separated or the rituals were not performed, it led to a sense of confusion and disorder. Through these classification strategies, the consultants and guests worked together to create a frame for the parties. This frame not only helped to shape the demonstration and discussion of products, but helped to guide the disclosure of private sexual information for guests.
Even if the consultant worked diligently to construct and utilize the sex toy party frame, there were instances where guests were either unable or unwilling to employ it. As Ecks (2001:626) acknowledged, it is often difficult for people to employ a new frame; to do so “is to admit that existing structures are no longer adequate, that the world in which they have found comfort and order is changing.” The inability to adjust to or to use a new frame can result in situations where one is “out of frame.” In the context of privacy and the sex toy party frame, being out of frame could occur in two broad categories. The first included those guests who were unwilling to disclose any information, or even to participate in the party at all. The second category included those who were too involved in the party, specifically those who over disclosed or who revealed too much private information. When confronted with these situations, the consultants had to quickly assess the situation and patrol the boundaries of the carefully constructed framework or risk losing control of the party. These boundary violations and patrolling and maintenance techniques are what we turn to next.
CHAPTER SIX: “IT'S DEFINITELY A DELICATE DANCE YOU HAVE TO DO”:
ROLE STRAIN, SHAME, AND GUESTS WHO REFUSE TO DISCLOSE

The most important aspect of framing, from a sociological perspective, is that we derive meanings from social situations based on the frames that we apply to them. Zerubavel (1991:11) argued that frames are able to “transform the meaning” of social interactions when different frames are applied to the same situation. How we understand a situation—other people’s actions and behaviors, and our own responses to those actions—depends in large part on the frame that is applied and whether or not we are able to interpret the frame correctly. As Stokes and Hewitt (1976:842) acknowledged, there are many things that can hinder our ability to interpret the social situation or that challenge our social interactions: “interaction is disrupted, identities are threatened, meanings are unclear, situations seem disorderly, people have intentions that run counter to others’ wishes, seemingly inexplicable events take place, people do not know what is happening to them, and the list could be extended almost indefinitely.” These problematic events can challenge our understanding of the frame and the situation in which we find ourselves. When these problematic events occur, we often “examine discrepant events with some care, seeking to determine what has gone wrong with [our] understanding of the situation” (Hewitt and Stokes 1975:2). Our understanding of the situation—and what went wrong—is especially important, given that people’s presentation of self is contingent on their behaving in expected and easily-understood ways (Goffman 1959).

When individuals behave in ways that do not seem to fit the common understanding of a social situation or when the frame no longer seems to apply, they have “broken frame” (Goffman 1974; Nippert-Eng 2010). When the frame is broken, or when we act in a way that is deemed “out of frame” by other social actors, we try to get our behavior “back in frame” by “[directing]
our attention toward it and [organizing our] conduct, individually and jointly” (Stokes and Hewitt 1976). This can happen in a variety of ways: we can issue a disclaimer before the action (i.e., if we anticipate that our upcoming behavior will be disruptive) or we can attempt to “account” for disruptive behavior after the fact (Scott and Lyman 1968; Hewitt and Stokes 1975; Stokes and Hewitt 1976). Stokes and Hewitt (1975:843) called these practices aligning actions, and they have the specific intent to get us “back in frame” or “realigned” with “what is thought to be typical, normatively expected, probably, desirable, or in other respects, more in accord with what is culturally normal.”

As detailed in Chapters Four and Five, sex toy party consultants worked diligently to construct the sex toy party frame, which allowed guests, hostesses, and consultants to discuss sex in a semi-public place without embarrassment. An essential part of the construction of this frame was encouraging guests to disclose some private information (e.g., positive experiences with products) while not disclosing so much information that they made others uncomfortable. Where the boundaries of the frame were placed varied from party to party; consultants told me that some groups of women were comfortable talking about anything and everything, whereas others were much more subdued and guarded their private sexual information more closely. Regardless of where the boundaries were placed at individual parties, the frame was rarely constructed and employed without problematic events and situations occurring where guests were “out of frame.”

As Figure 6.1 (adapted from Nippert-Eng 2010:290) illustrates, there are both internal and external definitions about how public or private a given situation or piece of information is. Whenever the internal definition (i.e., how public/private an individual defines the situation or information to be) does not match with the external definition (i.e., how public/private others deem the information to be), we can be said to be “out of frame” with regard to privacy.
There were two broad categories of being out of frame that occurred at sex toy parties, and both could be regarded as violations of privacy. In the first case (labeled A on Figure 6.1), a guest viewed the situation or information as more private than others (including other guests and/or the consultant) did. These guests were often reluctant to reveal any information or even participate in the party, and they expressed their discomfort and displeasure at being out of frame in a number of ways that are described in this chapter. In these instances, a guest may have viewed the products demonstrated, topics discussed, and questions asked as invasive and as violating her privacy. The other form of privacy violations that occurred at sex toy parties (labeled B on Figure 6.1) were caused by guests viewing information as more public than other guests or the consultant did (see Chapter Seven). In those scenarios (what Nippert-Eng [2010] calls publicity failures), other guests and the consultant may have viewed the guest’s disclosures as violating their privacy; in other words, they are learning something about that guest that they would prefer not to know. This is analogous to your neighbors leaving their blinds/drapes open and you being able to look in, perhaps permitting you to see something you wish you had not.

As Nippert-Eng (2010) argued, there are three broad ways of getting back in frame after one has been out of frame regarding privacy. First, we can change our understanding of how private something is; essentially, move from one of the shaded areas on Figure 6.1 to the “in-frame” portion in the middle. Using the analogy of the “dance” of privacy, in this instance the guest willingly learned the new steps (i.e., the new boundaries of the frame) and used them. Second, we can adjust our “privacy-related behaviors” to prevent violations from occurring in the future. In this instance, we would not change our understanding of how private it something is; instead, we would change the ways we protect that information. The dance of privacy in this case would require that the guests continues to do the “dance” the way they want, perhaps
ignoring the steps the consultant is trying to teach. Finally, we can “force others to adjust their behavior as a recompense for—or prevention of—any particular privacy violations” (Nippert-Eng 2010:295). We can do this by trying to move others from one of the shaded boxes in Figure 6.1 to the “in-frame” portion in the middle. In this case, the guests would try to force others at the party (including the consultant) to dance the way that they deemed appropriate. Consultants encountered guests who fell into both categories of being out of frame, and guests attempted to use all three techniques to re-frame the dance of privacy.

This chapter deals specifically with those guests who fell into the first category of violators: those who deemed topics and products as being more private than did the others in the group. Guests’ refusal to participate in the party was one of the most common challenges that consultants confronted, and it was often a difficult social situation for them to navigate. Because the consultants were often meeting guests for the first time and would interact with them for a relatively short period of time, it was nearly impossible for them to determine what was causing the guests’ reluctance. Were the guests concerned about their privacy? Were the guests uncomfortable with the products being sold or the discussions that were occurring? Or did they have a bad day at work or a fight with their partner before the party? How consultants dealt with the violations and consultants’ and guests’ attempts to try to control the dance of privacy are discussed within this chapter.

LETTING THE CONSULTANT LEAD: WHEN GUESTS LEARNED THE DANCE

Sex toy party consultants often had to confront guests’ preconceived notions of what a sex toy party would be like. Some guests believed that the parties would apply the pornographic frame (i.e., that they would be pornographic and raunchy), and they arrived at the party prepared for the worst. Part of the consultants’ challenge, as discussed in Chapters Four and Five, was
addressing these misconceptions by constructing and applying the sex toy party frame. The problem with the pornographic frame in the context of the sex toy party is that it made some guests feel uncomfortable, and their discomfort could impact the party atmosphere that the consultant was trying to build.

Most of the guests I observed during parties were already well on their way to applying the sex toy party frame with regards to privacy; most of them were repeat guests, so they were familiar with the framework and the level of disclosure that was deemed appropriate. A significant minority of the guests seemed to fit into the first category of guests who were trying to get in-frame (i.e., trying to adjust their own expectations about privacy and publicity). They entered the party believing they would be forced to discuss private sexual matters, and this preconceived notion made them nervous and reluctant to share. They were happy when they discovered that they would not be forced to disclose private information, nor would they be forced to listen to others’ disclosures. They happily learned the dance, readjusting their understanding of what was information was private and what information would be able to be disclosed without embarrassment (for themselves or others).

In the best cases, the implementation of the sex toy party frame went smoothly and guests readjusted their expectations for the party itself and the disclosures of private information that occurred at them. Chalese discussed this during our interview:

I honestly think a lot of women come thinking, “I’m gonna have to tell her, ‘Don’t touch me’”. . . .Because a lot of them, a lot of ‘em are always in the party saying, “I really thought this was gonna be raunchy, but you did a very good job of keepin’ it classy and educational” . . . .So, I think a lot of people come with the expectation that it’s gonna be really raunchy, and leave with a different view. . . you know, thinking “This is gonna be ok.”

Ria also mentioned the establishment of a new frame and its uses for guests when she told me during our interview: “You’ll hear women after the parties say, ‘Oh, it wasn’t nothing
like I expected.’ I said, ‘You’re probably like them men out there who think we strap the toys on and walk around and screw each other.’” These guests were anticipating having to apply the pornographic frame at the beginning of the party, and were pleasantly surprised when they discovered that was not the case. These guests seemed to be the vast majority of the guests I observed. Most of the guests seemed to have no trouble transitioning from one frame to the other—either because they had attended parties before, so they were familiar with the framework, or because the consultant did a good job of building and implementing the frame.

Sometimes this progression—learning the dance of privacy—occurred over just one party, as Chalese and Ria demonstrated. Sometimes, though, it occurred over a series of parties with the same group of women. During our interview, Daphne described a situation where a guest wanted a mild party (i.e., no toys would be demonstrated) because she was afraid that her guests would be uncomfortable with the erotic products:

Daphne: She had family members that were very skeptical about it and they wouldn’t, she knew that they probably wouldn’t come. So she reassured them that it would be something that was very tasteful, very classy, which is something I, is one of my signature things, is that we are classy. And it, it built a relationship between myself and that hostess so much that she had another party with the same people because they felt comfortable the first time. Did an actual normal party.

Interviewer: So it was kind of like a progression? (Chuckle).

Daphne: It was.

Through implementation of the sex toy party frame rather than the pornographic frame, Daphne was able to build a level of comfort with her guests; so much so that they were willing to have a “real” sex toy party the next time. Consultants told me that they saw this progression happen with guests all the time; women who were uncomfortable at their first party (i.e., very quiet and unwilling to disclose, often with closed body language) were frequently their best customers.
I saw this firsthand at several parties, but one of the most memorable instances was at Claire’s party. Claire promoted herself and was known by her customers as “the Christian consultant,” and many of her customers were leaders in their church communities. At this party, there were three generations of women, the oldest of whom was in her 80s and a church leader and grandmother and great-aunt to the other guests. I often stayed with the consultant during the ordering room process (as long as the guest consented), and after the ordering was completed, Claire told me that this was the second party the older woman had attended. At the first party, Claire told me, the woman had barely participated at all and had not come into the ordering room. At this party, though, she had participated significantly more (e.g., she and Claire made jokes and teased each other), and she came into the ordering room and spent several minutes discussing different products and sexual health issues with Claire and left with a variety of sample sizes to try. When the woman left the ordering room, Claire relayed all of this information to me and told me that by the time the woman attended a third party, Claire thought she would be ready to buy a clitoral vibrator. This was particularly rewarding for Claire; she had taken the time to build a relationship and a frame of disclosure with this guest, and she was seeing it come to fruition at this party.

DANCING TO THEIR OWN DRUMMER: WHEN GUESTS REFUSED TO PARTICIPATE

One of the most common occurrences consultants dealt with during parties was guests’ refusal to participate in the party. This could occur in several ways. Guests could refuse to try certain products (i.e., they did not want to taste or smell products, or have products tested on them); they could refuse to participate in the games; or they could refuse to touch any of the toys being passed around. Sometimes, a guest would do all three things and would essentially refuse to participate in the party at all.
Consultants had a variety of ways of explaining these situations and a variety of ways of dealing with them. Some guests were allergic to certain ingredients or were sensitive to smells; there was not much a consultant could do to make it safe for these guests to participate. During Candace’s party, one of the most outgoing guests in the group had to leave the party because the smells of the lotions and perfumes were overwhelming to her. In most cases, the consultants told me, guests were unwilling to participate not because of an allergy but because they were uncomfortable. Nyssa and Anna described situations like this during our interviews:

Nyssa: [Pause] I think when I’m just sitting there talking and it’s like I’m talking to myself. No one’s responding, no one’s like, there’s not a smile cracked. There’s just nothing, no one wants to try anything on their hand. I’m like, “I’m not asking you [to] put anything on your body,” everything is being tasted and touched on their hand. There’s, it wasn’t my party, it was my [new recruit]. She had a party and that’s what it was like. I was there, helping her as she was getting started, and there were about five women in the room, and they were just so...I don’t even know the word. Kind of in a stink, you know, with everything they were like, “No, no.”

Anna: I mean, really the worst parties to me are when the girls come and they just like, sit there. And they just like look at you and it gives, it does seem to be like, sometimes when they, the girls themselves don’t know each other, like if they just invite like sort of a weird mix of people.

Interviewer: Right.

Anna: You know what I mean? They don’t feel comfortable to like, speak out or share a story or something because they don’t know the girl over there and they don’t know, they don’t want her to judge them or you know, whatever the reason may be. But um, yeah I’ve had a couple of parties like that where it was just like, they were just all like, staring, and nobody wanted to barely crack a smile, it was you know. . .so those are the worst when you just feel like for whatever reason they don’t want to be there, or they’re not, they’re not into the party.

Situations like the one Nyssa described were very challenging for the consultant. Sex toy parties are supposed to be fun, lively get-togethers, and when the women at the party seem uninterested or bored, it presents an extra challenge to the consultant. Consultants needed to
assess, if they could, what was causing the problem so they could take the appropriate steps, if
any, to remedy it. Anna’s example illustrated how guests could be uncomfortable based on the
makeup of the rest of the guests; if the guests were unfamiliar with each other, it often created
resistance to disclosure. In these instances, guests simply ignored the consultants’ attempts to
教them the dance of privacy and maintained their own pre-existing privacy frame. These
situations required a strong presentation of self on the part of the consultant; they had to be
immersed enough in the performance to try to draw the guests out, but not so immersed in the
performance that they were oblivious to discomfort on the part of guests.

Based on my observations, I believe that these situations were the result of the guests’
inability or lack of desire to learn a new frame. The belief that sex is deeply personal and not
meant to be discussed outside of a few select situations and with a few select individuals is
deeply engrained in our society, and overcoming that socialization in order to establish the sex
toy party frame can be difficult for some guests. Complicating matters was the existence of the
medical/informational frame. In some of these cases of non-participation, it seemed to me that
guests were so afraid of being forced to be raunchy and explicit that they reverted to the polar
opposite: the medical/informational frame. From their perspective, at the abstract end of the
continuum even things that were mildly provocative could be seen as pornographic. In these
instances, the guests often treated the consultant as an authority figure rather than an informed
friend; for example, they would answer questions directed at them, but otherwise they did not
engage with the consultant.

In these situations, consultants had a variety of ways to try to subtly teach the guest the
rules of disclosure at the party and to get them to move into the correct frame. Because guests’
resistance seemed based on incorrect framing (e.g., believing the pornographic frame would be
applied, so firmly applying the medical/informational frame instead), consultants emphasized that guests would not be required to disclose private sexual information during the course of the party. This usually occurred when consultants played purposive games that required the guests to ask questions about the business in exchange for prizes. The consultants usually explained the game by asking the guests to focus their questions on the business and not the consultants’ sex life; “I’m not going to ask you about yours,” they would say, “so don’t ask me about mine.” Not playing games that required disclosures of private sexual information (like The Lap Game discussed in Chapters Four and Five) was also another way to implicitly teach guests about the rules of disclosure at parties and to reassure nervous guests that they would not be forced to disclose information if they did not want to.

Consultants also used various techniques to encourage or pressure participation from guests who seemed reluctant to get involved in the party. This usually consisted of saying to guests who did not want to play games, “Are you sure you don’t want to play? It’s fun!” and to asking guests who passed on sampling products if they were sure they wanted to pass. In addition, the consultants usually made sure to leave the invitation to participate open; that is, they made sure a guest knew that she was free to ask for a sample at any time. Emma and Candace illustrated this during their interviews:

Emma: If they don’t want to try things, then that is actually fine with me. If I notice like I’ve passed them like twice and they don’t want to try that product, I just tell them, “Ok, you know what, that’s fine if you don’t want to try a product. If there is something that you want to see, though, just let me know and I will be more than happy to let you try it.”

Candace: If someone doesn’t want to participate, it’s generally what they, ‘cuz they don’t. . .nobody has to participate in a game, but usually if someone doesn’t want to participate, generally they don’t want me to put stuff on them. They don’t want to put the lotions and all that. So, if I go around the room a couple times at the beginning, and every time I go around she like pulls her hand away and is like “No, no, no,” by the fourth or fifth time I go around, I’ll look at her and say, “You know what, I don’t want to make
you uncomfortable, so I’ll just skip over you unless you ask me not to. So don’t feel like you have to touch or feel anything, except that I’m just going to skip over you and if you want to try something, let me know.” And so she’s like, “Ok.” It really kind of takes the pressure off every time I come around, feeling like she has to taste or smell it.

Both of these examples are typical of the statements that consultants made to guests if they were reluctant to participate in the party. As Candace remarked, not requiring participation (in effect, allowing for comfortable non-participation) was an important aspect to building comfort among guests. If consultants pressured guests to sample products, they would likely annoy and possibly alienate the guests by appearing to do a “hard sell.” Many of the consultants also said that they would begin their parties by stating that no one was required to participate or to sample products; in fact, many of them told the guests not to pressure each other into trying things if they were uncomfortable doing so. Nyssa discussed this in her interview, and mentioned it specifically in the context of creating a comfortable environment for guests:

You know, I will tell them, “If you don’t want to touch it, you don’t want to taste it, it’s not a problem. Don’t let your friends beat you into it. ‘Cuz you know, sometimes your girlfriends will say, ‘Go ‘head! Do it! Do it!’” I don’t want anyone to feel uncomfortable. So I tell them, “That’s fine. If you don’t want to play the little games we play sometimes, that’s fine.”

Trying to create a comfortable environment was important not only for the construction of the sex toy party frame in general, but for constructing a framework regarding privacy that guests could employ. Given the preconceived notions about sex toy parties that many guests had, consultants would often err on the side of caution and allow guests to maintain their existing comfort level with regards to disclosure of private information. These guests began the party being out of frame with regards to privacy—they viewed things as being more-private than other guests (and perhaps the consultant) would have liked—but because they did not present an open challenge to the construction of the frame, they were allowed to maintain their existing frame. Rather than move in-frame, they employed different mechanisms to protect against future
invasions; specifically, they applied the medical/informational frame, which involved very little disclosure of personal sexual information. There were guests, though, who presented an open challenge to the construction of the privacy frame at sex toy parties, and those guests often threatened to destroy both the party environment and the frames that the consultant was trying to build.

REFUSING TO LEARN THE DANCE: HOW GUESTS TRIED TO PREVENT DISCLOSURES

Some guests actively rejected the privacy frame that consultants tried to employ; in Nippert-Eng’s (2010:295) language, they tried to “force others to adjust their behavior.” These attempts to control others’ behavior could come in a number of forms, ranging from (a) relatively mild and not particularly damaging to the frame being constructed to (b) severe techniques that, if not addressed immediately, threatened to derail the party completely. The mild end of these techniques included guests vocalizing their discomfort with others’ presence at the party. For example, some guests experienced role strain when others at the party were deemed too socially close or too intimately connected (e.g., mothers and daughters) to take part in the disclosures that were occurring. Guests expressing discomfort or disgust with certain products or sexual practices was another attempt to control the behavior of others. This occurred most often when consultants discussed anal sex and products related to it. These expressions could be relatively mild (e.g., guests who stopped making eye contact with the consultant when she discussed these topics) to more severe (e.g., guests who made negative or judgmental comments about the products, the practice, or individuals who might engage in the practice). Finally, the most severe of the control mechanisms guests used was attempting to shame the consultant or other guests for their participation in the party. This technique severely threatened the consultants’ and other guests’
presentation of self and the construction of the sex toy party frame, and needed to be addressed quickly if the party dynamic and the sex toy party frame was not to be damaged.

“I Can’t Believe We’re Talking about It With Your Kids Here”: Role Strain

One of the most common situations that seemed to make guests uncomfortable was the presence of immediate family members. It was common for mothers and daughters to attend the same party, and several parties I observed had three generations of women (a grandmother, mother, and daughter) in attendance. It was also not unusual for mothers-in-law, daughters-in-law, and sisters-in-law to attend the same parties. Occasionally, the result of these different roles at a party was role strain (Goode 1960). Role strain occurs because everyone has multiple roles (e.g., daughter, mother, wife, employee) and occasionally the responsibilities these roles require (or the roles themselves) come into conflict with one another. The challenge, according to Goode (1960:485), is to “make [our] role system manageable” and try to eliminate some of the role strain. Goode (1960) argued that one of the major types of role strain was when different roles required “contradictory performances,” and this was the major cause of role strain at the parties I observed. In particular, the presence of mothers (or mothers-in-law) and daughters (or daughters-in-law) seemed to be particularly problematic.

The roles of mother and sexually autonomous person are often seen as incompatible or in direct opposition to each other (Montemurro and Siefken 2012; Trice-Black 2010; Weisskopf 1980). As Trice-Black (2010:154) pointed out, “society often presents a split between motherhood and sexuality. The more sexual a woman is perceived to be, the less she may be perceived to be a good mother.” Montemurro and Siefken (2012:5) discussed how the roles of mother and sexual woman were socially constructed as if they are opposites:

Sexual gratification is often viewed as indulgent. . .and in some religions, immoral. Thus, those who pursue sexual pleasure can be viewed as self-focused. Furthermore, the ideal
mother in our culture is one who is self-sacrificing and whose primary concern is her children, rather than herself. Thus, it may be difficult for women to justify or reconcile their images of mothers and sexual women.

I would argue that just as ideal motherhood is conceptualized by the culture as being without sexual desire, ideal daughterhood is constructed somewhat similarly. As Montemurro and Siefken (2012:5) noted, most girls are socialized by their mothers, and daughters learned to identify with and adopt the roles their mother demonstrated, including “prioritizing relationships with others over individual achievement.” In addition, other research has indicated that some mothers had a gendered approach to educating their male and female children about sexual health and sexuality; boys were taught about and even provided with contraceptives, whereas daughters were rarely provided with contraceptives and were sometimes even discouraged from carrying or using condoms (reinforcing the “good girl/bad girl” dichotomy) (Fasula, Miller, and Wiener 2007). I saw this conceptualization of daughters as asexual at several parties, but Claire’s party offers a typical illustration. At this party, there were three generations of women, all of whom had attended parties before; this example focuses on the hostess and her college-aged daughter Melissa:

Claire was just beginning to demonstrate the dual-action toys, which contain both vaginal and clitoral stimulators. She described a technique to get a sense of the different sensations of the toys; basically, guests would “shake hands” with the shaft of the toy. She warned the guests not to grip the toys too tightly with their hands, because “None of us are that tight anymore, except Melissa, who is still a virgin, right?” As she says this, she winks at Melissa, who is sitting next to her mother. Her mother says, “Oh, child, I don’t need to hear about this!” The rest of the women laugh, and Claire says, “Oh, no, she’s a good girl, I can tell.”

The implication, of course, is not only that the mother was uncomfortable hearing about her daughter’s sex life, but that “good girls” do not have sex. The fact that Claire said this with a wink and a lighthearted tone and the mother’s response was filled with false distress indicated that this was not an attempt to stigmatize or shame Melissa; instead, the jocular tone implied that
everyone was in on the joke. The humor, though, depended on the existence of the good girl/bad
girl dichotomy, and no attempt was made to challenge this dichotomy.

Of course, the roles of sexually independent woman and mother/daughter do not have to
be opposed to each other, and for some of the guests at parties that I observed these roles were
not diametrically opposed. Whether or not the mothers and daughters experienced role strain
seemed to hinge upon their own relationship (e.g., whether they had openly communicated about
sex in the past) and the reaction of other guests to a mother and daughter being present at the
party. Some of these situations could be problematic if others deemed the presence of a mother
and daughter to be inappropriate, and could become even more problematic if other guests
deemed the mother/daughter disclosures inappropriate, given the two’s social closeness and the
social construction of ideal mother/daughterhood. During our interview, Josie discussed an
instance where she was uncomfortable with a guest’s disclosures, specifically because of the
guests’ relationship to another guest (her boyfriend’s mother):

Josie: I did a party for this one girl. . .she did the party with her boyfriend’s mom. And
like, I would never think to share anything about that with. . .

Interviewer: With your boyfriend’s mother?

Josie: Yeah. But they had that relationship and they didn’t say too much, but. . .Well, no,
actually, the girl was like, “That product is great, and that product is great. . .” I’m like,
“That’s your boyfriend’s mom!”

In this example, Josie was the one who seemed to be uncomfortable with the level of
comfort and disclosure between the guest and her boyfriend’s mother, especially since she stated
that she did not have that kind of relationship with her own boyfriend’s mother. But she
acknowledged that “they had that relationship,” and although it was not the type of relationship
she shared with her boyfriend’s family, she was respectful of their relationship and allowed them
to disclose as they saw fit. Even though Josie did not specify what products were discussed as
being “great,” the implication was that they were more-erotic products; it would hardly be shocking for a woman to reveal to her boyfriend’s mother that she used shaving cream or scented lotion. Almost all of the consultants told me that they were comfortable with any level of disclosure at a party, as long as the guests were comfortable. In fact, many of the consultants discussed their “outsider” status at the party, specifically that they were entering the party without a complete understanding of the social dynamics of the guests. A given party might be comprised of women who “share everything,” and the consultant did not view it as appropriate or beneficial to discourage disclosures in that environment. This is why Josie did not discourage the guest from sharing private information with her boyfriend’s mother; they “[had] that type of relationship,” and she did not view it as her role to challenge that.

Michaela also shared an example of a situation where a guest was uncomfortable with others’ relationships and their disclosures, and vocalized it repeatedly throughout the beginning of the party. This situation was deeply problematic, Michaela told me, because it threatened the party atmosphere and the comfort level of the other guests:

Michaela: So [the guest] was, like, very unhappy to be there and every time something would come up, she’s like, “I can’t believe we’re talking about it with your kids here,” ‘cause the [hostess] had her, not her kids, her daughter was of age. . .

Interviewer: Right. Adult daughter, right.

Michaela: Yeah. Nonetheless, she was like, “I can’t believe you’re talking about it with your kids here.” I mean, it was just awful, and you could just tell everybody was kinda like getting upset cause she wouldn’t shut up about it, and I mean, you could just tell. And I told her, I was like “Listen, if you don’t want to be here you can always leave,” because I was feeling uncomfortable because the whole group was feeling uncomfortable. And I was just, you know, like, um, “Oh my god, if you don’t want to be here then get the hell out.”

Interviewer: “Go home.”

Michaela: “Go home. Enjoy it by yourself.” You know what I mean? “Enjoy it yourself. Go away.” And I was trying to be as polite as I could.
Interviewer: Did she stay?

Michaela: She stayed. She stayed and she bought.

Michaela and Josie’s examples are different in a variety of ways. Michaela seemed to be fine with the presence of a mother and daughter at the party, and she seemed comfortable with their level of disclosure. Another guest, though, was clearly uncomfortable and began to chastise the mother for having her adult daughter present during the party. This in turn led the other guests to become uncomfortable (perhaps when they would not have been, had it not been for the guest reprimanding the mother), which in turn made Michaela uncomfortable. In this instance, one woman’s discomfort—and her vocalization of it—created a Domino-effect that had the potential to disrupt the party environment and the construction of the sex toy party frame. To prevent this, Michaela did something that consultants rarely did: she openly confronted the guest. Confronting guests, especially about their disclosures of private information (or lack thereof), was something that consultants were reluctant to do. During our interviews, consultants discussed the fact that groups of women could have different levels of intimacy and willingness to disclose. As Josie mentioned, guests might have “that type of relationship,” and to reprimand a guest because of their disclosures might alienate the others. In this case, though, the confrontation seemed to have the desired effect: the guest stopped complaining, stayed through the remainder of the party, and even purchased from Michaela.

In one of the worst-case scenarios, an extreme case of role strain ended a party early, as Daphne described in our interview:

Daphne: I had a party that was set up by a lady; she was setting it up as a bridal shower for one of her friends, a co-worker. And when I arrived at the party, I had a thought that the fact that I was coming was only kept from the bride, but it was actually kept from everyone there. And no one knew that I was coming and what I would be doing. So I set up. I was actually uncomfortable, which is huge for me. And I set up, set up everything
and then moments later, about 20 minutes into my demonstration, with their hands on their face and their heads down towards their laps, I determined that they didn’t want me there. And I didn’t want to make them uncomfortable, so I explained to them that I had no intention of [continuing] if they’re uncomfortable and that, you know, I’m here to help and to entertain and empower and have fun, but you guys are uncomfortable, so I’m going to excuse myself. And I packed up and left.

Interviewer: You didn’t do ordering?

Daphne: I had the bride, who came down to my vehicle. She placed an order as I was leaving, packing up everything. She apologized and said that the only reason she was uncomfortable was because that the people present were her future mother-in-law, her mother, and women who she would not invite to a party of her own.

As Daphne’s example illustrates, the relationships between the guests mattered greatly in terms of determining the comfort level of the guests. If guests were uncomfortable with the makeup of the group (in this case, people who were too socially close to the bride), there was little the consultant could do to make the situation less awkward. Privacy and the disclosure of private information depended not only on the social situation, but the social actors involved, as evidenced by the bride’s statement to Daphne: “The only reason [the bride] was uncomfortable was [because] of the people present.” Another important element in Daphne’s example was that it seemed that none of the guests knew what type of party they were attending. Although it was not uncommon for “surprise sex toy parties” to be thrown for bachelorette parties or bridal showers, it was usually the bride that was the subject of the surprise. Surprise situations rarely turned out well for the consultant in terms of the social and financial success of the parties; the guest of honor was often deeply uncomfortable, and could be angry with her friends for surprising her. Consultants told me that “surprise sex toy parties” were often planned for guests whom the hostess deemed “uptight,” so it is not surprising that those guests would be reluctant to disclose private information and apply the sex toy party frame with regards to disclosure. Not surprisingly, those situations did not result in many sales for the consultants. In Daphne’s case,
this issue was magnified: it appeared that all but a few of the guests (and perhaps only the
hostess) knew that they were going to be attending a sex toy party. I asked her how this situation
informed her business going forward:

Interviewer: So, if you were to have that situation again, would you tell the hostess? . . . I
mean, you said that you sort of knew that the bride didn’t know you were gonna be there.

Daphne: I’ve completely changed my method. When I set up the party with a hostess, I
ask her—or someone who’s setting it up for someone else—I ask her if the guests know
that I’m coming, and do the guests know what type of party it is. And if she tells me they
do not, I tell her that either they [should] know, because it’s not everyone’s cup of tea, or
I must respectfully excuse myself from doing the party.

Daphne acknowledged that sex toy parties are “not everyone’s cup of tea,” and that
women who fit into that category should not be made to attend a party when they are unaware of
the nature of the products being marketed. These guests would likely have the hardest time
getting in-frame with regards to privacy; not only is the sex toy party itself unappealing to them,
but they have not even had the benefit of time to mentally prepare for the evening.

The fact that the consultants enter into a party without a complete understanding of all of
the guests’ relationships to each other (and how intimate those relationships are) indicated
another important factor: these relationships can be fraught with pre-existing tensions of which
the consultant is completely unaware. Jillian illustrated this during her interview, when she
discussed the first time she hosted a sex toy party before becoming a consultant:

We don’t have a spectacular relationship with my husband’s parents. And when I hosted
my own party [before becoming a consultant], his dad kept making really snide remarks
about, when [Jillian’s sister-in-law] was about to leave [to attend the party]. [My sister-
in-law] is my age and she was like, “I’m going down to Jillian’s party” and he’s like, “I
just don’t understand why the hell she’d have a party that we’re not invited to.” And [her
sister-in-law] was like, “Well, its girls only,” and he’s like, “Why isn’t your mother
invited?” And finally so my sister-in-law whipped her head around and she’s like, “Dad,
truthfully, do you really think mom wants to know what Jillian and [her husband] are
into? Like, really, have you thought about this?” And he’s like, “Well, she could have at
least asked.” They’re ridiculous.
Social relationships between guests represent their own sort of dance. This dance—between family members and close friends—often has its own back-story (sometimes dating back decades), and is one that the consultants cannot learn the steps to in the short amount of time they have with guests. Often, consultants do not even need or want to know all of the history that would explain guests’ relationships with one another. Instead, the challenge is to subtly instruct guests on how to employ the sex toy party frame and do the dance of privacy correctly in that social environment, while allowing them to continue their own collaborative dance.

These role strain situations did not always have to result in a problematic situation; in some cases, they generated some of the most humorous situations at parties. The women’s mild discomfort with each others’ disclosures was often the source of delight on the part of other guests. Kimberly described a situation in which disclosures between mothers and daughters did not harm the party; instead, they enhanced it:

Like they’ll...you know, and sometimes they’ll be like family members there, like you’ll have like a mom and a daughter there or you’ll have two sisters and you know, sometimes the other one’s like totally plugging their ears, like “Ohhhh, mom!” They’re like, totally willing to disclose and you know sometimes the daughter will be like, “Well, you know, I heard that using, like, a mouth toy during oral sex is really pleasurable for the guy,” and the mom’s like, “Well, I’m glad I didn’t learn anything new from what you just said” (laugh).

This reaction—one of shocked bemusement—was quite common when guests experienced role strain. Also common was a sort of tit-for-tat role strain process, especially surrounding issues of disclosures of private sexual information. As Kimberly stated, sometimes one guest (in this case, the mother) who was shocked at another’s (her daughter’s) disclosure repaid that shock by saying something that she thought might shock the other guest (e.g., the mother essentially stating that she already knew the oral sex trick the daughter mentioned).
During my observation of Lexi’s party, a similar situation happened, after the discussion of the “ABCs of oral sex” (anniversaries, birthdays, and Christmas), and the hostess’ mother said, “that might be one or two many letters”:

The hostess rolled her eyes and said in a shocked tone, “Thanks, mom!” The mother paused for a moment as the guests laughed, and then said to Lexi, “Sorry, I’m her mom.” While everyone laughed at their discomfort, she hastily turned to her daughter and joked, “You were adopted. That never happened—don’t worry.” Lexi laughed along with the group and continued the demonstration, telling the guests about the different flavors the lubricant comes in, including one that tasted like pancake syrup. In a seductive yet playful tone, the hostess said, “I like sausage with my pancakes,” and her mother quickly retorted, “No you don’t!” Lexi and the group laughed again.

Another example of the different types of relationships that can occur between close social networks (e.g., between mothers and daughters) occurred later in Lexi’s party, but this time it occurred during a discussion between the guests. This is the same party as the above example, and the interaction occurred between the mother, the daughter, and one of the daughter’s friends:

Lexi was discussing how to stimulate a man’s prostate during intercourse, referring to it as “the male g-spot.” The room is nearly silent, which was usually an indication that the guests are listening intently. One of the guests, a college-aged woman, turned to the hostess (also college-aged) and said in a tone of mock-outrage, “Why didn’t we have these talks?” It is clear from her tone that the information Lexi is sharing is new to her. The hostess’ mother heard this comment, and both the mother and daughter said to the guest (in unison): “We had those talks. You just weren’t there.” The guest made a kind of disgruntled noise, like she had been excluded from something and was just finding out about it. The rest of the guests laughed.

This example illustrated the difference in relationships—and comfort discussing sex—between the hostess and her mother; it appeared that they had in-depth and extensive discussions about sex, something that the friend did not have. It also seemed (at least to me) that the discussions the hostess and her friend had were quite open as well; the question “Why didn’t we have these talks?” was directed at the college-aged hostess, not her mother (though having that
discussion with her hostess’ mother did not seem out-of-bounds, based on the mother’s reaction to the question).

Another example of positive responses to role strain occurred at Jackie’s party. There were three generations of women at this party: the hostess’ mother (who had just celebrated her 91st birthday), the hostess, and the hostess’ niece (who was a grandchild of the grandmother).

When the grandmother (whom everyone called Mama) entered the room and took a seat, it became clear that she was not intended to be a guest at the party. One of the other guests (who was not a member of the family) said—only somewhat jokingly—that Mama did not need to be there and that she did not need to “see this stuff.” Jackie replied that “Mama might recognize some of these products; you wouldn’t be here if she didn’t.” Mama laughed a little sheepishly at this. While Jackie demonstrated a spray that makes bed sheets feel like satin, the hostess said, “Since my mama’s here, I don’t know nothin’ about satin sheets. I don’t know nothin’ about sex, I don’t know nothin’ about any of this.” During the toy demonstration, Jackie used the hostess (who was the most outgoing party guest) as a volunteer. Jackie blindfolded and handcuffed the hostess, then handed her a variety of dual-action toys (which contain both clitoral and vaginal stimulators) one at a time. The purpose of the demonstration, Jackie told the guests, was to get them to think about how a product feels, rather than what it looked like or how much it cost. While she was being handed the toys and was assessing the different sensations, the hostess was dancing and gyrating in sync with the toys to indicate her preference for one toy or another. While she did this, she continually said things like, “I love this one! I think I’m in love! Mama, I’m gettin’ married!” “Mama, are you still here?” and “It’s not me doing this, Mama—it’s my evil twin!” This is done with great appreciation from the guests, who laughed uproariously. Mama remained seated and laughed along with the other guests.

As these examples demonstrate, role strain did not always have to result in a serious violation of privacy; instead, it could be regarded as a playful and with good humor, and could be a source of amusement for other guests. Moreover, consultants’ own experiences of role strain that occurred when they were guests or hostesses at parties could be used as a source of humor when they later became consultants. Nora described this process during our interview, when she discussed attending her first party with her daughter (before she became a consultant):

I had a lot of fun, there were some awkward moments. I found out more about my daughter than I really thought I needed to.
Interviewer: [Later in the interview]. . . Have you ever had a situation where someone revealed too much private information at a party, like in the group?

Nora: My daughter! To me! (Laugh).

Interviewer: Your daughter, to you? Oh, and you were the. . .what, the first party you went to?

Nora: Yes! (Laugh).

Interviewer: Ok, so, well tell me about that. What was it that made you uncomfortable?

Nora: [Makes a disgruntled, annoyed noise, then laughs). Um, the consultant asked a personal question, basically “Who here does such-and-such?”

Interviewer: Right.

Nora: “Raise your hand in here if you do such-and-such,” and my daughter goes, “Mom, close your eyes.”

Interviewer: Oh, God (laugh).

Nora: And I was like, “Um…” And still to this day, I tell it as a joke in my parties. “At my first party, my daughter tried to injure me and hurt my brain for life. I can’t even remember it, because the majority of the party was a clicking and buzzing sound as my brain was slowly exploding for the rest of the party.”

Because most, if not all of us, have experienced situations like this (where we “learned more” about someone than we wanted to know), these situations serve as a common language for consultants and guests. Nora was able to use her experience of role strain with her daughter as a source of humor for her guests because it was something that likely many of the guests have experienced. It also served as a boundary marker for guests; by describing how her “brain exploded” upon hearing these revelations about her daughter, she was able to subtly instruct the guests about boundaries between public and private information. It also served as a learning experience for Nora: because of her experience with her daughter, she knew that asking personal questions of her guests (“Who here does such-and-such?”) were likely to have similar results for them, so she avoided asking those types of questions.
Being able to handle difficult guests or social situations often resulted in deepened respect for the consultant from the other guests. Guests often told consultants that they admired how they handled difficult guests, as Melinda described during her interview when I asked how she prevented hostile guests from ruining the party atmosphere:

You can’t. You just have to be good at what you do. You have to know that the audience feels her negative energy, ‘cuz like, I’ve had it happen all the time with the older women. They’ll come in and be like, “I’m so amazed at how you handled that. I never could have handled that girl. I would have punched her in the face.” I’m like, “Why? She’s the one with the issue, not me.” “Well, you handled it very well.” And I’m like, “Well, thank you.” . . . Most of the time, everybody else in the room has already seen it and they know who she is and they don’t want to deal with her either. She shouldn’t be there. And they’re like, “Why is she even here?” I was like, “Why don’t you go ask her?” . . . But that also makes people in the other room want to work more with you because of the way you handled that. Because you showed them. You don’t get mad or angry, you don’t, that’s not gonna affect me. Do I get angry? Yeah, a couple times I get very mad.

To Melinda, “being good at what you do” meant not only the demonstration and sale of products, but having the social acumen to handle difficult personalities without damaging what should be a fun and informative social environment. This shrewdness in dealing with confrontational or difficult guests served to bond consultants to other guests.

“Do Not Yuck In Someone Else’s Yum”: Vocalizing Displeasure at Products/Topics

Another way that guests tried to control the amount of disclosure that occurred at parties was through expressing their displeasure that certain topics were being discussed. This could occur in subtle ways (e.g., guests who refused to make eye contact with other guests or the consultant during portions of the demonstration) or in more obvious ways (e.g., guests saying things like, “Eww!” or “We don’t need to see those products”). Nearly all of the consultants I interviewed said that this was most likely to happen when they began to discuss anal sex (commonly called “booty play,” “playing the back nine,” or “back door sex” by consultants).
The use of humorous euphemisms was an attempt to create comfort for the guests and to gently broach the subject, but guests often still rejected the discussion:

Nyssa: Like, “Eww.” And a lot of time it’s the anal, or the anal products. I think those more than anything I get asked about in private and not too much in public. Or like, there’s a certain lubricant we recommend you use during anal sex. And when I mention it during the party, you know, everybody’s like, “Oh we don’t do that!”

Interviewer: Right.

Nyssa: But then back in the ordering room, they’re all, “What was that stuff you said, for anal?” (Laugh). I guess that’s still really taboo to people, so they don’t want to talk about it in front of their friends, which I understand.

* * *

Michaela: Booty play is probably the most, but it’s probably one of the most, I sell the most. But during the parties they’re like, “No, that’s the back door,” and then in the ordering room its like, “So, does that stuff really work?” (Laugh). ‘Cuz it’s like, it is a [numbing cream]. But they’ll tell me, “Oh I need it for hemorrhoids,” or “I’m buying it for so-and-so.”

Interviewer: Buying it for someone else, right.

Michaela: “And it works really good in your eyebrows, to wax them,” you know, stuff like that.

Interviewer: Huh.

Michaela: And I’m like, “Ok. (Laugh). Sure you are [in a sarcastic tone].”

Nyssa and Michaela illustrated this point nicely: guests made derogatory comments about specific products in an attempt to dissuade the consultant (or other guests) from discussing them. As Nyssa explained, guests wanted those sexual practices to remain private, and guests protested the inclusion of these subjects during the party because they feared if they expressed interest in learning about them, other guests would assume that they engaged in those practices. As Breanne said during our interview, “It’s like they don’t want their friends to know that. I wouldn’t tell my friends, like, ‘Yeah, I do that’ (laugh), so I think it’s more of just kinda like pushing back from
that.” Ironically, those were the products that guests were most curious about and asked the most questions about in the ordering room. This was one of the most common recurring themes in my interviews, and consultants told me that they were often able to predict what guests would purchase based on how much they disapproved of the product being demonstrated or discussed.

Consultants handled these protestations against discussing certain products in one of three ways. The first involved a blanket statement at the beginning of the party that guests should not make judgmental or negative comments about products, because they would not want to make other guests feel bad about their interests/sexual practices. Both Kimberly and Daphne mentioned this technique in their interviews:

Kimberly: One thing that I do ask at my parties is that nobody add any negative comments because you never know who might be sitting right next to you that really, really likes something and now you’ve made them feel like shit.

Daphne: My second rule [that she gives guests at the beginning of the party] is (laugh). I got it from my sponsor, it’s “Do not yuck in someone else’ yum.” I just tell them that, you know, we’re going to be going further into some more intimate topics and I may be talking about something that is not their cup of tea. It may not be something that they are interested in hearing about, but there’s the lady next to them, they want to hear what I have to say about it, so I ask that they be respectful of others at the party and if they have any comments that are negative about what I’m speaking of, that they keep them to themselves. And as much as some people would think that would turn people off, it doesn’t, because you have those ones who want to hear about anal play and want to hear about those type things.

Interviewer: Does that rule seem to work for you? Like does that actually cut down on the negativity?

Daphne: Oh, yes. [And] I’d rather put it out there than wait ‘til they say something and then you’ve got someone who’s offended.

During my observation of Daphne’s party, she did discuss this rule with guests as she transitioned from the non-erotic to the erotic portion of the demonstration. In addition, she mentioned at the beginning of the party that she “wouldn’t make them uncomfortable by asking
them about their sex lives,” so they should not make another guest uncomfortable by making negative comments.

The second technique that consultants used to reduce guests’ negative comments and guests’ attempts to control the topics discussed was by addressing the need for information. Consultants viewed anal sex in particular as a subject that guests needed (and wanted) more education about, even if guests were not open about the fact that they wanted the information. Emma discussed this during our interview:

Definitely the anal. I think it’s definitely a taboo topic. It’s not so taboo nowadays, [but] people still don’t really talk about it. And I have ladies at the party that the second I bring it up are like, “Oh yeah, I want to know all about that.” And they’re all talking about who’s done it, what they do with their life. But most people are very, that’s a very taboo topic for ladies and they don’t especially want to hear it. But I tell them, “You know what ladies? Statistics tell me that 50 percent of women are either having anal sex or will in the future, so I just want to educate you. I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable. I’m gonna let you know how to use this, so that if you ever use them or you have a friend that’s going to use them, you guys are using them properly, so no one ends up in the emergency room or anything like that.” But I just make it more educational instead of making a lot of jokes about it.

During Lexi’s party, she addressed the stigma associated with anal sex explicitly when she stated: “For a lot of women, anal sex is a taboo topic. But if we don’t talk about it, it will always be taboo.” She went on to say that she viewed it as “my responsibility” to educate women about anal sex, “because you may have a time when you want to try it.” Using this technique allowed the consultants to emphasize the educational aspect of their work—something that all of the consultants said they found extremely rewarding—while also retaining control over the topics that were discussed during the party. Offering statistics, like Lexi did during our interview and during the party, also allowed women at the party to feel like they were not “abnormal,” whether they had engaged in the practice or not.
The third and final way in which consultants dealt with guests’ attempts to control discussions and topics was to acquiesce to the guests’ demands. Few of the consultants told me that they would stop talking about a product or sexual practice on the spot if guests made negative comments; those who eventually stopped showing taboo or controversial products said that it was something that happened over the course of time. If guests at multiple parties indicated that they were uncomfortable discussing specific products/topics, these consultants said they were reluctant to continue demonstrating those products. The following interview excerpts indicate this process:

Michaela: I don’t show booty plugs or anything like that because, you know, girls don’t wanna talk about booty sex, they don’t even, they don’t even wanna say that they want [numbing cream].

* * *

Carolyn: We have a [lubricant specifically designed for anal sex] and there are girls that are just like, “No, don’t say another word,” you know. And I have, I’ve actually gone, “Well, ok, we all know what that’s all about,” and I’ll, you know, discuss it more in the ordering room if they’re interested. But I’ve had several, I had a couple parties where all I have to do is bring it up, and to where I don’t even show it anymore. I mean it’s one of those products [I have on-hand, but do not demonstrate] and if somebody goes “Well what’s this?” then I can say, “Ok, that’s what this is,” but, more often than not, I kind of get nervous about certain things like that. . . We have the [anal] beads and they don’t want to see those either. They don’t want to touch them. Don’t even pass those around, ‘cuz I mean I could take them out of the package, brand new, but they don’t want to touch them, you know, so (laugh). Yeah, that’s definitely one of the stigmatisms [sic] that a lot of people are nervous about discussing. But there are other [guests who] will go, “Oh, yeah, I love that stuff. . .” and you’re like, “Ok, go on, girl” (laugh).

For these consultants, their experience running parties told them that guests were uncomfortable having these types of products demonstrated or discussed. Interestingly, it was not fear of guests offending others through their negative comments that concerned them (i.e., “I don’t demonstrate them because the negative comments embarrass other guests”), but the negative reactions in-and-of themselves that concerned these consultants. The problem with
allowing the guests to broach the subject (whether in the ordering room or during the party itself) is that it puts the onus on the guest to discuss what is supposed to be a stigmatized or taboo behavior, and guests may be reluctant to bring taboo topics up with consultants. By not discussing these practices and acquiescing to guests’ protests about their inclusion in the party, consultants become complicit in the further stigmatization of these practices.

“She Was Telling Me That I Did the Devil’s Work”: Shaming the Consultant or Other Guests

The final and most extreme way that guests tried to control others’ disclosures was through the use of shame. This was relatively uncommon among the consultants I interviewed. Few of them had experienced direct opposition during a party, though most of them acknowledged that they occasionally felt stigmatized by others (i.e., family, friends, church members, or strangers) based on their work. Hostile guests tried to use shame and stigma against the consultants and other guests in an attempt to control the amount of disclosure that occurred during parties. In essence, guests who used this technique seemed to believe that no discussions of sexuality or sexual practices were appropriate to discuss (or were not appropriate in the presence of specific others), and they attempted to enforce this perspective by shaming other guests or the consultants into silence. In the example given earlier in this chapter, Michaela discussed an instance where one guest attempted to shame the hostess because the hostess’ daughter was also attending the party. After the guest repeatedly told the hostess that she “couldn’t believe we’re talking about it with your kids here,” Michaela confronted the guest and told her that if she was uncomfortable, she was free to leave. This example is important in a number of ways, not least of which is the fact that Michaela could sense the discomfort on the part of the other guests, so she felt the need to address the situation openly. The oppositional guest was attempting to shame the mother about the presence of her daughter; in her view, this
was an inappropriate situation for mothers and daughters to attend together because sexual information would be discussed and would be disclosed. Though less extreme than Michaela’s situation, Claire described a similar incident, this one involving a bride-to-be and her future mother-in-law:

Claire: I’ve had, you know, whole bachelorette parties where it was one mother-in-law-to-be was like, you know, “My daughter-in-law don’t need that stuff!” You know, and I’m like, “Your daughter-in-law’s maid-of-honor called me at your daughter-in-law’s request!” (Laugh).

Interviewer: Yeah. “You don’t know what your daughter-in-law needs.”

Claire: “And your son and your daughter-in-law looked at the catalog before [the party].” I didn’t say that, but it was funny.

Claire’s example demonstrated that guests occasionally used less-severe methods in their attempts to rebuke the presence of specific others at the party. Claire’s presence at the party indicated to this mother-in-law that she was likely to “learn more” about her son and daughter-in-law than she might want to (e.g., that they might use the products being sold). Moreover, it illustrated an idea discussed in Chapter Five; namely, that women are primarily responsible for a couple’s sex life. The mother-in-law did not say, “My son doesn’t need that stuff”; instead, it is assumed that all the products purchased would be used by the daughter-in-law, either to supplement their sex life or as a substitute for partnered sex.

When asked about the worst part of their work, many of the consultants said that the stigma that their job carried (i.e., that they are sex-crazed or perverted; see Chapter Five) and the negative reactions they received from others (including friends, family members, acquaintances, and strangers) were their greatest challenges. Although confrontations with guests about the value and appropriateness of their work were rare, Lexi had just such a confrontation with a guest at the beginning of a party:
Lexi: At one of the parties I went to, the lady wasn’t happy to be there, and she told me.

Interviewer: That was one of the guests or the hostess?

Lexi: One of the guests.

Interviewer: Ok.

Lexi: Um, she was just telling me that I did the devil’s work. And during the party [she] would not try one thing. And that’s perfectly fine with me. If someone doesn’t want to try something, that’s no problem, I will be more than happy to pass you. Just don’t make a negative comment every time I come around. But I think it came out to be that she has like four kids from four different men and I’m just like...the nasty side of me came out, I was just like, “Really? Like, how can you judge me? You’ve done a lot of similar things.”

Interviewer: So how did you deal with that at the party? Was she like, saying that, you’re in the middle of the party, and she’d say “You do the devil’s work?”

Lexi: [nods].

Interviewer: Wow.

Lexi: “[You do] the devil’s work.” “I can’t believe you would sell stuff like this.” Um, to me...I just laughed it off, you know, and I try not to let it bother me.

Interviewer: What did the other women do?

Lexi: A lot of them were rolling their eyes and saying like, “Oh, sorry, she’s, you know, she’s like this.” I mean they’re the ones that told me that she had a couple kids from different men, you know. So I just try to laugh it off, like take it with a grain of salt and, you know, maybe she’s just mad about something that’s going on that day that didn’t have anything to do with me, so. You know, um...so you know, I just try not to let it bother me ever.

Interviewer: Ok.

Lexi: Shake it off. . .no big deal.

Most of the consultants said situations like this were very rare, though not unheard of. In most cases, they said that guests were aware of the type of party it was and what type of products would be sold. If a guest were to be confrontational—as happened in Lexi’s situation—the guest would be viewed as both hypocritical and as intentionally provoking the confrontation by
attending a party she knew she would be uncomfortable at or disapproved of. In Lexi’s opinion, the hostility directed toward her was magnified by the fact that the guest was being hypocritical; not only did the guest attend a party where she knew sex toys would be sold, but—according to Lexi—she had engaged in stigmatized sexual behaviors herself.

Carolyn also shared her experience of hostility from guests during our interview. Though she had not encountered anyone who was openly confrontational, she did get the sense that some guests were uncomfortable with the products being demonstrated and they were projecting that discomfort onto her:

Carolyn: I always tell them when I do my demo, I say, “I’m gonna come around and you can smell or taste or feel whatever, and if you don’t want me to, just say ‘pass’ and I’ll walk right by.” And the very first time I came by she said, “This is my official ‘pass’ for the entire party,” and I went, “Ok.” You know, and so I mean there’s been people at the parties that are, you know, almost hostile as far as my presence and just, you know, feel as though it’s inappropriate or whatever, but at the same time, my thought is “Why are you here?” (Laugh).

Interviewer: Yeah, you knew what it was.

Carolyn: “If you knew what you were coming to, or you don’t like what you see, you’ve got two feet and there’s the door, you know, if you don’t want to be here. If you’re uncomfortable, if you really don’t like what’s going on, why are you still sitting on the couch, staring at me like I’m the devil?” (Laugh). So, I mean, yeah, I don’t think there’s ever... I don’t think I’ve ever had a party where I’ve had anyone get upset or aggravated, but I’ve certainly had parties where, you know, they’re just kind of not interested, simply. But I mean I think that’s kind of the nature of the business. You’re always gonna have somebody that wants to act like they don’t do what everyone else is doing (laugh).

Carolyn’s statement illustrated the same idea as Lexi’s: guests whose hostility was thinly veiled (or were openly hostile, in Lexi’s case) presented a challenge to the construction of the sex toy party frame, the framing of privacy in the context of the sex toy party, and the party dynamic in general. To the consultants, the guests who engaged in this type of aggressive behavior to control disclosures or content of the party were at best hypocritical and at worst antagonistic. This was especially ironic given the fact that when faced with these types of
situations, those guests often purchased products anyway (and were often the biggest purchasers of the products they disparaged).

Guests who viewed certain topics or relationships as more private (or conversely, less public) were the ones who were least able to learn the steps to the dance of privacy the consultants were trying to teach. Those guests who were the most confrontational—who attempted to shame other guests or the consultant into not attending the party or not discussing specific topics or products—were likely those who were most out-of-frame with regards to the “goodness of fit” of the privacy frame (Nippert-Eng 2010). The fact that others were willing to learn the steps makes this category of guests’ refusals all the more obvious and disruptive. Rather than adjust their own behavior, they attempted to engage in Nippert-Eng’s (2010) third solution to privacy violations: forcing others to adjust their understanding of how public or private some information should be.

CONCLUSION

Guests and consultants engaged in a delicate dance of privacy at sex toy parties. Though they were encouraged to discuss some private information for the consultant, life struggles that might have led her to become a sex toy party consultant; for the guests, products they had tried and sexual difficulties they were having), they had to be cautious about revealing too much information. Consultants not only worked diligently to build a sex toy party frame that bonded the women together and to the consultant, they also worked to carefully construct and maintain a frame that allowed guests to discuss private sexual information in a setting that was foreign to many of the guests. As outlined in the introduction to this chapter, there were two major ways of being out of frame with regards to privacy at sex toy parties. The focus of this chapter has been the first type: situations where guests regard the topics or products (or indeed, the existence of
sex toy parties) as too private to be discussed in the semi-public setting of a sex toy party. These guests often refused to participate in the party and disclosures (at least initially), perhaps because they believed they would have to utilize the pornographic frame to do so. The vast majority of guests eventually adopted the sex toy party frame (even if they did so somewhat reluctantly), but a significant minority of guests simply refused to adopt the frame. These guests often refused to participate in the party, though they often purchased products anyway. Finally, some guests were very vocal about their belief that the topics and products discussed should remain private and consultants used a variety of techniques (depending on the severity of the disruption) to defuse these confrontations.

The second type of situation where guests were out of frame occurred when guests thought their disclosures were acceptable within the sex toy party frame, but other guests or the consultant believed they were too personal. In other words, these guests viewed the information they shared as being at least somewhat public, and the other guests disagreed. These situations are the focus of Chapter Seven.
External ("objective") framing of the situation/object/matter of concern
(i.e., how public/private others demonstrate this to be)

Internal ("socio-subjective") framing of situation/object/matter of concern
(i.e., how public/private the individual understands this to be)

Figure 6.1 In and Out of Frame Diagram
(adapted from Nippert-Eng [2010:290])
CHAPTER SEVEN: “YOU JUST HAVE TO GRIN AND BEAR IT”: ALIGNING ACTIONS, EMOTIONAL LABOR, AND GUESTS WHO DISCLOSE TOO MUCH

As discussed in Chapter Six, guests who were out of frame with regards to privacy presented a unique challenge to sex toy party consultants. The majority of guests were able to adopt the sex toy party frame and disclose the appropriate amount. Chapter Six focused on those guests who were out of frame in a specific way: they regarded their information as more-private than the rest of the group did. For sex toy party consultants, these guests present a specific problem: their lack of participation (or, in the worst cases, their aggression toward the consultant or other guests regarding privacy) could threaten the party atmosphere and other guests’ willingness to participate.

This chapter focuses on the other broad category of guests who were out of frame at sex toy parties: those who regarded their information as being more public than the other guests (or consultant) did (see Figure 6.1, the area labeled B). These guests offered a completely different challenge to the consultants than the “more-private” guests did. While the more-private guests often applied the medical/informational frame, disclosing information only when absolutely necessary, guests who were “more-public” often crossed the boundaries into the pornographic frame. Consultants had to carefully manage the boundaries between the pornographic frame and the sex toy party to prevent the party from veering too much into the former, especially given the fact that they were actively trying to construct a comfortable space for everyone. Where the actual boundary was between the “right amount” of disclosure and “too much” or “too little” varied from party to party and from one set of guests to the next, but in general, consultants said that explicit discussions of one’s partner usually crossed that line, as did overtly sexual displays and discussion of specific sexual health concerns that guests had.
Instances of under-disclosure were usually less problematic for consultants and other guests, in large part because there were numerous explanations for a guest’s refusal to participate (i.e., allergies, sensitive skin, etc.), most of which did not damage the party atmosphere. Just as the situations that involved over-disclosure came in many different forms, the forms of damage they could cause to the party frame were also numerous. First, these disclosures threatened the construction of the party frame; if guests witnessed another guest engaging in inappropriate disclosures, it might encourage them to over-disclose as well. Second, these disclosures often crossed the boundary into the pornographic frame, so they threatened the construction and maintenance of the boundaries in the first place. Third, these disclosures often could damage the guests’ presentation of self. As Goffman (1959) and others (Dellwing 2012; Hewitt and Stokes 1975; Scott and Lyman 1968) have argued, one of the goals of human interaction is not only to preserve our own presentation of self, but to help others maintain their own. We often engage in “tactful blindness,” ignoring minor slips and errors in others’ presentations in order to do this (Goffman 1959; Goffman 1967; Hewitt and Stokes 1975), but it is much harder to tactfully ignore situations where others disclose more than we are comfortable hearing.

In addition, these disclosures forced others to question whether their assessment of the over-discloser’s identity (and even the entire situation) had been correct. Perhaps most damaging, these disclosures could force guests to reassess their social relationships and status in relation to the over-discloser. Despite the fact that privacy seems to be an intrinsic part of our selves, privacy is a social agreement that is granted to us by others. When we experience a violation of privacy—whether someone invades our privacy or we are exposed to someone else’s private information—it makes us realize that we are not only “subject to others’ agendas [and their] ability to carry them out,” but it can make us question the level of social standing we have
with the violator (Nippert-Eng 2010:294). This is why we often become very upset at violations of our privacy; it makes us question our social relationships and ask “why should this person’s…definition, their agenda, trump mine? Does this mean they’re actually more important that I am?” (Nippert-Eng 2010:294). This type of violation can be deeply damaging, because it reveals how important others’ opinions of us are in building our own sense of self. The damage done to one’s sense of self and social relationships simply is not as large when we consider under-disclosures and the multitude of explanations available to explain guests’ lack of participation and disclosure.

Guests who over-disclosed fell into two broad categories: those who seemed to realize they were over-disclosing and tried to correct their social faux pas and those who did not realize it (or, more likely, did not care). The first category of guests often used aligning actions (Stokes and Hewitt 1976) to resolve or prevent damage to their presentations of self or their social relationships. Those guests that seemed unaware that they were disclosing too much information were far more likely to fall into consultants’ “worst experiences,” often because of their obliviousness or willful ignorance that they were causing discomfort among other guests and disrupting the party. These guests often revealed more information about themselves than the other guests seemed comfortable hearing, or they engaged in sexually explicit behaviors at the party. These guests were engaging in Nippert-Eng’s third strategy to get back in frame: they attempted to change the boundaries of privacy by forcing others to change their behavior. These boundary violations and the consultants’ attempts to deal with them are the focus of this chapter.
TRYING TO GET BACK IN FRAME: USE OF ALIGNING ACTIONS TO MAINTAIN BOUNDARIES

Most of the guests who engaged in over-disclosure relied upon aligning actions in order to get back in frame when they realized their disclosure had created a rift in the party dynamic or party frame. Aligning actions, according to Stokes and Hewitt (1976:843), are intended to close the gap between “what is actually taking place in a situation and what is thought to be typical, normatively expected, probable, [or] desirable.” Even though we use shared frameworks to interpret our social world, there are myriad ways that these interactions can break down, and resolving these situations are not as easy as “‘looking up’ a particular situation in a ‘cultural catalog’ of problematic situations and events” (Stokes and Hewitt 1976:844). Aligning actions, then, are our attempts (usually verbal) to resolve these problematic situations while maintaining our own presentation of self, allowing others to maintain their presentation of self, and getting the social situation “back on track.” Though there are many different types of aligning actions, the ones that I saw most commonly used at sex toy parties fell into the broad categories of disclaimers and accounts.

Disclaimers, Hewitt and Stokes (1975:2) argued, are offered before an inappropriate action or statement, and are used to create “interpretations of potentially problematic events intended to make them unproblematic when they occur.” Accounts, as discussed by Scott and Lyman (1968:46), are “statements made by an actor to explain unanticipated or untoward behavior—whether that behavior is [his/her] own or that of others.” Accounts are offered after an inappropriate behavior, and are used to justify or excuse the behavior; these accounts can either be honored or not by those we offer them to, depending on how severe the violation is and how appropriate our account is. In other words, we offer disclaimers and accounts as a way to
either defuse or to prevent a situation that threatens to damage our presentation of self. In addition, disclaimers and accounts may be an attempt to prevent the “relationship reassessment” that Nippert-Eng (2010) discussed. Because they are used to separate identities from actions, accounts and disclaimers may help to prevent others from re-assessing the violator’s identity and their social relationship.

Aligning actions also served to reinforce the boundaries of the privacy frame. Not only did guests’ use of aligning actions display that they knew where the boundary was, but were going to cross it anyway (or, in the use of accounts, they had already crossed it), but it also demonstrated that the over-disclosing guest knew that the rest of the guests were aware of where the boundary was. Otherwise, they would have no need to offer a disclaimer or account for their over-disclosure. When guests used disclaimers and accounts, they were saying to the rest of the group, “We all know where the boundary is, but I have a good reason to cross it.” Disclaimers and accounts, then, were an attempt to reinforce the boundaries that already existed by acknowledging that those boundaries existed and had been violated, and to heal any gaps that were created when the guest crossed them. This served as a reminder to everyone as to where the boundaries were, the consequences of crossing them, and the social actions that were necessary to get back in frame.

Use of Aligning Actions: Disclaimers

Disclaimers, as Hewitt and Stokes (1975) outlined, are important to resolving problematic events in our social interactions. The meaning of social interaction is created as people act in relation to one another, altering their behavior to fit the situation they believe is happening. In addition, we rely on these actions as a way to understand each others’ identities. As Hewitt and Stokes (1975:2) stated, “when events fail to fit themes in interaction, identities
may come into focus as problematic: if the acts of another fail to appear sensible in light of [his/her] identity in the situation, perhaps [he/she] is not who [he/she] appears to be.” Therefore, problematic events can threaten not only the social interaction and the meaning derived from it, but the identities we are attempting to construct and our presentation of self. We use the actions and speech of others to determine what “type” of person we are dealing with: how they are likely to behave and how we should behave in response. Hewitt and Stokes (1975:3) argued that disclaimers are an essential part of social interactions because “individuals know their own acts serve as the basis for typifying them; they know that specific acts they undertake will be treated by others as cues for typification.” There were two major types of disclaimers that I observed at sex toy parties: hedges and qualifiers.

“I don’t know if you can relate”: Hedges

Hedges can come in a variety of forms, and both consultants and guests used them frequently during the party. The use of hedges, according to Hewitt and Stokes (1975:4), is meant to “signal minimal commitment to the impending line of conduct.” It is a signal to the other actors that we are prepared to be contradicted; that we are unsure how our transgression will be received; and that the ramifications might be severe if our disclaimer is rejected. Guests often used hedges when they were asking questions of the consultant, either during the question-and-answer games or during the course of demonstration. Guests would often open their line of questioning with a phrase like, “This might be a stupid question,” or “Maybe I’m the only one who doesn’t understand this.” These hedges offer the guest an “out,” so to speak, in that the disclaimer allows them to disengage their upcoming statement from their identity as others perceive it. Guests seemed to use this technique when they were asking a question that they believed many other people in the room (or, at least, the consultant) already knew the answer to,
and they did not want to be re-typified as someone who was uneducated or ignorant regarding sexuality. Specifically, guests used these disclaimers when they asked a question about anatomy (e.g., “This might be a stupid question, but where is the clitoris?”) or about how a product worked (e.g., “Maybe I’m the only one who doesn’t understand…how does the arousal cream work?”). Many consultants told me during interviews—and I observed during parties—that they often tried to “head these questions off at the pass” by explaining the locations of body parts and how products worked before guests had the opportunity to ask. This saved the guest from having to pose a question that might be re-typifying. In addition, consultants believed it was likely that another guest might want to know the same information, but be uncomfortable about asking. This approach—answering questions before they were posed—allowed consultants to control the amount of disclosure happening, and also to help the guests save face.

Hedges were also used by consultants, which offer an interesting insight into their identity construction and maintenance over the course of the party. Statements like “I don’t know if you ladies have experienced this” or “I don’t know if you can relate” were used to create connection and shared experiences between guests and consultants, yet these types of disclaimers also allowed the consultants to disavow their forthcoming statement if it negatively impacted their presentation of self. These statements were rarely openly contradicted by guests; in fact, these were the statements that seemed more likely to generate positive, affirming responses, indicating that the disclaimer worked Bianca offered an example of this type of hedged during her party:

Bianca was discussing a linen spray that is designed to absorb moisture, and began the discussing the product by saying, “I don’t know about you, but it always seems like the wet spot [after sex] always ends up on my side of the bed.” The guests laugh and agree. One says, “Oh, that’s totally true!” and another says, “That happens to me, too!”
As this example Bianca’s party demonstrated, hedges were an effective way for consultants (and guests) to mediate the damaging effects of upcoming statements by separating their identities from those statements. As Goffman (1967) would predict, guests were usually willing to accept and honor the disclaimer, some going so far as to agree with her statements. This agreement—whether wholly felt or not—might have dissuaded other guests from refusing to honor or openly challenging the consultants’ disclaimers. While these disclosures might not seem particularly revealing, the consultants were using themselves as examples; when they said, “I don’t know if this has happened to you,” they were disclosing that it was something that had (likely) happened to them. By using a disclaimer, the consultants were able to separate themselves from the statement in the event that it was damaging to their presentation of self.

It is also important to note that consultants used these hedges as a way to highlight commonality between the guests and themselves. Hedges were often used to bond the women together by emphasizing the shared experiences that many of the women at the parties were believed to have, and those experiences were often ones of struggle or of humorous dealings with men. It is unlikely that their disclaimer would have been honored if they had used it to highlight an uncommon or unique experience; imagine hearing a statement like, “I don’t know if you can relate, but when I won the lottery I was under so much stress.” This disclaimer would most likely not be honored by the audience, and would most likely lead to the re-typification that was trying to be avoided.

“*This might be TMI*”: Qualifiers

Offering a qualifier is another form of disclaimer, but it distinctly different from the use of hedges. Hewitt and Stokes (1975:4) referred to this type of disclaimer as a credential, stating that it’s use is appropriate when “the outcome of [the] act will be discrediting, but [we are]
nevertheless strongly committed to the act” (Hewitt and Stokes 1975:4). Qualifying a statement or action means that the actor knows the act he/she is about to engage in is cause for re-typification, but because the action or statement is intentional, he/she should be exempt from any re-typification. As Hewitt and Stokes (1975:5) argued, “it establishes the actor as one who may have purpose in what [he/she] is doing, so that others cannot easily regard [him/her] as an unknowing representative of a particular negative type. One who has purpose may have good purpose, whereas one who acts in blind ignorance of the implications of [his/her] act is presumed not to.”

The most common form of qualification used at sex toy parties (by both guests and consultants) was through their use of the phrase “This might be too much information [TMI], but,” or “You might not want to know this, but…” Guests often prefaced their disclosures with this phrase as a way to acknowledge that they were crossing the boundaries of private/public information, but that they had a reason for it. They were not unaware of the boundaries; instead, they had a rational reason for crossing them. This statement would often be followed by an endorsement of a particular product (usually one on the more-erotic end of the product spectrum; e.g., “You might not want to know this, but that arousal cream is the best thing ever!”), or a disclosure about their sexual experiences and/or practices (e.g., “This might be TMI, but you should really get a clitoral vibrator. It will change your life”). These were usually not lengthy or detailed disclosures (usually a sentence or two), but guests felt the need to offer a qualification anyway.

One exception to this “short statement” rule occurred during an interaction between myself and a guest at Jillian’s party:

All of the guests at this party were labor and delivery nurses at a local hospital, and several of the guests were discussing another guest’s attendance at the party. They all
agreed that she badly needed to attend the party because her husband was having sexual difficulty stemming from health problems and medication he was taking. As the party was beginning, I was mingling and chatting with guests as the guest in question arrived. She sat next to me, and I introduced myself and explained my presence at the party. She immediately said, “Well, this might be TMI [too much information], but since you’ve been to a ton of these parties and I’m sure you’re an expert, you could tell me what to buy.” She then spent a few moments telling me about her relationship and the sexual difficulties they were having. I told her that I was not an expert on all of the products in the catalog the way Jillian was, and since I was not a consultant I would leave recommendations to Jillian. Just then, Jillian started introducing herself to the guests and I moved out of the circle to observe the party.

This situation illustrated several important points about qualifications. In this case, the guest offered me a qualification to explain her actions; because “I was the expert” on sex toys, she felt that she could disclose more to me so that I might be able to help her. In addition, this guest continued to disclose at this level throughout the party; I noted in my field notes that she had a “one-track mind,” and that she was uninterested in any products that she did not think would help her situation. In none of these later situations did she offer qualifications; it was clear that the other guests at the party—who were not just her co-workers, but her close friends—did not need these qualifications as they were already aware of her situation. To use Hewitt and Stokes’ (1975) language, the other guests knew her purpose, and she wanted to make me aware that she had a purpose to offer before disclosing to me what she believed might be re-typifying information. The fact that I offered the guest a disclaimer as well (a hedge: “I’m not an expert…”), illustrated not only how common disclaimers are in conversation, but how they can be used to smooth over fractured social interactions. She assumed that I was an expert, and although I knew the products quite well by that point in my research, I was not comfortable offering her a suggestion. I contradicted her assumption by stating that I was not an expert, but offered Jillian up as an expert instead in an attempt to fix the problematic situation. Offering this
disclaimer was not something I thought about or deliberated on before I said it, which shows how integrated into our culture and frameworks aligning actions are.

Consultants offered qualifications as well, and in some unique ways. During our interviews, most of the consultants said they rarely or never disclosed personal sexual information about themselves (even when guests asked), because they did not view it as professional or because they wanted to avoid “giving guests a visual” of them using a product. Few of the consultants lived up to this high standard, and most of them revealed some private information about themselves during the course of the party or in the ordering room. This often came in the form of personal endorsements of non-erotic products (e.g., shaving cream), or recommendations for more-erotic products that came with a wink and a nod. Consultants often told me that if they wanted to disclose their own experiences to guests, they often did so by saying that it was a “friend” who had the experience (even if it really was them). Interestingly, they often started these disclosures with a statement like, “This might be too much information” or “I don’t normally share stuff like this,” despite the fact that the consultant was hiding the source of her information. Candace did this during her party:

Candace had just started demonstrating a vaginal tightening cream, saying “I don’t normally share personal stories, but I just have to with this product.” She went on to say that she “has a friend who tried this and is a very happy girl.” Her friend had just had a baby, and was starting to have sex with her husband again, but was worried about her post-baby body. Candace recommended that she try the cream before their romantic evening and that Candace would check on her the next day. When she did, Candace’s friend told her that their evening had gone wonderfully and that the cream had enhanced their experiences. Later, in the ordering room, Candace tells me (and another consultant that was observing her) that that story was really about her, not about a friend.

What is interesting about these scenarios—which consultants said they used quite often to hide their personal disclosures from guests—is even in this situation they felt that they needed to add a disclaimer before their disclosure. This indicated that they thought their ruse (“this
happened to a friend”) would work well enough that it might be considered an over-disclosure, so they offered a qualifier to prevent damage to their presentation of self.

The success of a disclaimer in protecting one’s identity and presentation of self is almost entirely dependent on whether or not the audience accepts or rejects the disclaimer. A disclaimer is made of two parts. First is an “identity claim” wherein the person offering the disclaimer is distancing themselves from one identity and claiming the opposite identity. For example, in the question “This might be too much information, but I really love the arousal creams,” the guest is distancing herself from the identity of someone who shares too much information and affiliating herself with the identity of someone who shares the correct amount. The second portion of the disclaimer is the substantive claim (in this case, a factual claim: “I really love arousal creams”). Being able to separate the identity and substantive portions of the disclaimer is important, Hewitt and Stokes (1975) argued, because disclaimers can be rejected based on the identity claim, the substantive claim, or both. The most successful disclaimers are accepted wholly; neither the identity nor the substantive portion of the disclaimer is rejected. This was the case in most of the instances of disclaimers that I witnessed at sex toy parties. Perhaps because the middle-class standards of party and gendered etiquette rules apply (Mullaney and Shope 2012), guests were less willing to challenge each other’s disclaimers.

It is also possible that the guests rejected each other’s disclaimers, but managed to hide this from the disclosing guest. Because interaction is a back-and-forth between the social actors, we are able to tell when our disclaimers have worked because they should evoke a specific reaction in our audience. Disclaimers are successful when we do not receive the reaction we sought to avoid; for example, when we do not hear, “If you know it’s too much information, why are you sharing it?” An additional complication is added to the use of disclaimers because
audiences are able to conceal their reactions, making us believe our disclaimers worked when they really did not. This could result in pretense awareness contexts (Glaser and Strauss 1965), wherein the recipient of the disclaimer knows it was rejected and that the guest who offered it was re-typified, but the guest who offered the disclaimer is not aware that it was rejected and that re-typification had occurred. This is quite possibly the situation that occurs when guests at sex toy parties use disclaimers: other guests give the impression that the disclaimer was accepted, when in reality the other guest was re-typified.

Use of Aligning Actions: Accounts

Unlike disclaimers, accounts are offered after the fact to explain problematic actions or words. Accounts, Scott and Lyman (1968) argued, become “standardized within cultures so that certain accounts are…routinely expected” when our behaviors do not meet expectations. Accounts come in two broad forms. Justifications occur when we accept responsibility for our actions, but deny the negative ramifications of it; denial of injury and denial of the victim are examples of justifications that have become standardized. Excuses are used when we admit that the action was wrong, but deny full responsibility for it, such as appeals to accidents and scapegoating. Like disclaimers, accounts can be honored or not, depending on whether the account we offered seems to make sense for the offense in terms of the severity of the offense and appropriateness of the account. Accounts were used after guests realized they had violated the privacy boundaries that were established through the sex toy party frame and that they had created a problematic situation with their disclosures. Accounts, if they were honored, allowed the guests to try to remedy the situation by offering an explanation for their violation.

Sad tales were one of the most common accounts that were offered by guests who engaged in over-disclosures of private information. A sad tale, according to Scott and Lyman
(1968:52), is a “selected (often distorted) arrangement of facts that highlight an extremely dismal past, and thus ‘explain’ the individual’s present state.” Sad tales were used by guests to justify why they were disclosing sexual difficulties they or their partner were having, especially if these disclosures were on-going throughout the party or were derogatory toward their partners.

Unfortunately for the guests, these were the types of statements that consultants felt were among the worst types of disclosures, because they made them and other guests uneasy. Nyssa discussed this during our interview, when I asked her whether guests’ disclosures ever made her uncomfortable:

I think the one time that I felt a little uncomfortable, it was a group of girlfriends, and it was this woman that she was talking about she was getting married in the summertime, and she kept saying how she needed some prolonging cream. “He don’t last but five minutes.” And I felt embarrassed for him. I was like, “Why are you telling your friends? They look in this man’s face all the time!” I felt bad for the guy, really, and he didn’t even know. But, I thought that was a bit much, to tell that kind of detail. Because I mean, if there’s anything a man’s gonna be embarrassed about, it’s the size or if he doesn’t last long. So, that was uncomfortable for me. That was probably the only time that I was like, “Wow”….I think for me, because when you’re saying you’re gonna buy this toy for you, you’re talking about yourself. You’re revealing information about yourself. But when you’re talking about your husband—it just feels like a lack of respect. You know, dealing with your future husband, and someone that all your friends know. And we all know how sensitive men are (laugh), you just don’t reveal that kind of information about them. Seriously.

Nyssa’s statement illustrated several important points about the use of accounts. In this case, the guest offered a sad tale to justify her over-disclosure; she was frustrated with her sex life, and continued to mention this frustration throughout the course of the party. Nyssa did not appear to honor the account the guest offered: “it seemed like a bit much” to reveal that kind of information and then offer that account. In other words, the severity of the breech of privacy boundaries was not erased by the justification the guest offered. Moreover, this situation involved a recurring theme that consultants discussed when they talked about over-disclosures at parties: guests who revealed information about their partners—especially information that would
be damaging to their partner—were often viewed as making inappropriate disclosures. These disclosures were made worse by the fact that the men were not present at the party, so they were unaware that the disclosure had been made. This resulted in pretense awareness contexts, as Nyssa alluded to: the guest and her friends now knew about the partner’s sexual difficulty, but he did not know that they knew. Moreover, this violation was seen to strike at the heart of the partner’s masculinity. Disclosures that revealed information about a partner’s sexual performance were significantly more problematic for exactly that reason; it seemed to be an attack on his masculinity, one that he did not even know was occurring. Nyssa thought this situation was serious enough to address it with the guest:

Nyssa: I actually said to her, “Should you be telling everyone this?” And I started making, like, a joke.

Interviewer: This is about the prolonging cream?

Nyssa: Yeah, and she was like, “It’s ok.” And I was like, “I don’t know if he’d think it was ok.” You know, I tried to make a joke out of it at the same time telling her, “Don’t tell everyone this.”

Consultants had a fine line to walk when guests engaged in too much disclosure. They had to avoid offending the disclosing guest by refusing to accept her disclosures or by openly rejecting her account; in addition, the consultant had to be aware of the group dynamics at play. As noted in Chapter Six, consultants were often unaware of the level of intimacy guests had before they arrived, so guests had to be aware of the fact that they might be type of group that shared much more intimate information than the consultant was used to. Kendra discussed this during her interview, when she described a situation where she was the consultant at a party that one of her friends was hosting:
Kendra’s situation illustrated important points about the use of aligning actions to fix problematic disclosures. Maryanne offered a sad tale as justification for her actions (she and her husband were having serious marital problems), but that account did not appear to be honored by the guests and was not honored by Kendra. Maryanne’s disclosures were far more intimate and had greater consequences for the social situation and the other actors, given that one guest left in tears, and the sad tale that she offered (a troubled marriage) simply did not justify her disclosures. In addition, Kendra noted that she was not sure whether the other guests were aware of Maryanne’s problems before she started disclosing them, again demonstrating the importance of the intimacy level and social connection of the guests in determining whether disclosures are acceptable or not. Kendra also tried to help her friend preserve her presentation of self and identity by initially honoring her sad tale, using it as “a joke” for the rest of the guests to try to lighten the mood and get the party back on track. Maryanne kept disclosing, though, and Kendra could not keep honoring Maryanne’s account in the face of other guests’ discomfort and the evidence that other guests were not honoring the account.

GUESTS WHO IGNORE THE FRAME: OVER-DISCLOSURE AND OVERTLY SEXUAL DISPLAYS

Consultants often encountered situations of over-disclosure where the guest did not offer an account or a disclaimer for her actions. These situations were particularly problematic, for two main reasons. First, those guests who used aligning actions were indicating that they were aware of the boundaries and had only momentarily crossed them. Guests who did not offer an aligning action often did not appear to care where the boundary between public and private or the boundary between the sex toy party frame and the pornographic frame was. Consultants then had
to attempt to reconstruct the boundaries for all of the guests, not just the over-disclosing one, or risk the possibility that the party would spiral into the pornographic frame.

Second, and perhaps most important, social actors offer accounts and disclaimers for a reason: it allows them to “save face” when they have done something inappropriate. Consultants rarely rejected guests’ disclaimers and accounts, because to do so would be to further damage the guest’s presentation of self. Instead, they cooperated with the guests’ aligning actions, allowing the guest to save face and get back in frame. Consultants were perhaps more willing to honor these aligning actions because the guest could get back in frame easily; to refuse to honor them or to shame the guest would have been more disruptive than just smoothing over the situation and continuing with the party.

Guests who were out of frame and showed no signs that they cared about it were a different situation entirely. For consultants, there was often no way to “help” the guest save face, because the guest often did not appear interested in maintaining their presentation of self. Instead of simply honoring their disclaimer or account, consultants had to come up with different ways to get these guests back in frame. Consultants had a variety of ways to address these situations and try to re-establish the frame, including allowing other guests to help patrol the boundaries, redirecting over-disclosures to the ordering room, and involving the disruptive guest in the party.

“They’re Gonna Do the Dirty Work for You”: Getting Guests to Patrol the Boundaries

Consultants often relied on other guests to help patrol the border between the sex toy party frame and the pornographic frame. Guests who over-disclosed were often directly told by other guests that they did not want to hear the disclosures, as Michaela discussed in our interview:

Interviewer: So how do the other guests usually respond when a situation like that happens?
Michaela: Well, most of the time they’ll tell them themselves, you know, “Hey, shut up, nobody wants to know about it.” They’ll tell them themselves, but if they don’t they’ll just be like, “Oh my god,” or they’ll apologize non-stop, you know (laugh).

Interviewer: To you, they’ll apologize to you? Like, “Oh sorry about my friend?”

Michaela: Yeah.

As described in Chapter Six, guests (especially family members) often patrolled the boundaries between their relationships in situations of role strain. In this case, too, guests patrolled the boundaries between the pornographic frame and the sex toy party frame by telling each other “Hey, shut up,” as Michaela described. Also common from my observations were statements like, “Well, that was more than we needed to know about you,” or “I didn’t need to know that about you.” These were more often than not said in a joking and light-hearted way; rarely were guests very forceful in admonishing each other, but their remarks were nonetheless effective.

Guests were not always reliable as border patrol, though, because they were sometimes unaware of the boundaries themselves or because they felt uncomfortable reprimanding guests with whom they were not socially close. In these cases, consultants had to address the situation themselves, but this could be a socially complex situation, as Candace described during our interview:

Well, and they tell you, [in training] they tell us not to pause, they just say, “Keep talking” and do not raise the level of your voice. Just keep talking. People [who] are going to want to hear you, and they’re gonna be doing the dirty work for you. But sometimes I will pause, and I’ll just wait. I’ll look at her and I’ll wait for her to get talking, and then she’ll realize I’ve stopped and I’m looking at her, “Oh, I’m sorry.” But it’s a very fine line you have to walk, because I’m not there to discipline them, they’re there to have a good time. I’m not there to, you know, tell them to shut up so they can listen to me, they’re [there] to have a good time. So it’s a fine line. But at the same time, I’m trying to do a job and I, you know, I have family to come home to and get to deal with as well.
What Candace described was a common technique among consultants to deal with guests who were disruptive or who over-disclosed. Disruptiveness and over-disclosure have significant overlap, but are not identical concepts. Disruptive guests were those who interrupted the demonstration, though the interruptions were not always caused by over-disclosures (e.g., a guest might interrupt the consultant, but the interruptions might not be personal in nature). Conversely, guests who over-disclosed were often guilty of being disruptive (e.g., a guest who repeatedly interrupted the demonstration to ask personal questions was often regarded as “disruptors” and “over-disclosers.” In either case, consultants often just continued their demonstration and hoped that other guests who wanted to hear the demonstration and learn about the products would “do the dirty work” of quieting guests and putting a stop to over-disclosures and disruptions. Candace also mentioned the “fine line” that consultants had to walk: they did not want to offend guests by telling them to be quiet or to stop disclosing, but they had to be able to manage the situation in order to maintain the boundaries of the party frame. Melinda mentioned this during our interview as well, when she discussed a party where she had a trainee with her and two guests were very disruptive. In the ordering room, she mentored her trainee about the best way to handle guests who were disruptive:

I hate that the two were so rude, but I can’t fix that. I didn’t, you don’t shush, you don’t tell them, if you do that, you’ll lose the respect of everybody in the room….Because you don’t call people out in front of other people, obviously in front of other people, ’cuz that’s the worst thing you could possibly do, in the middle of it.

Managing these situations was complicated, and to do so required an incredible amount of emotional labor on the part of the consultants, something that is a hallmark of all kinds of direct sales (Hochschild 1983; Mullaney and Shope 2012). Emotional labor, Hochschild (1983:7) wrote, “[required] one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others.” Consultants engaged in emotional labor at all
stages of the party, but no more so than when they were dealing with disruptive or upset guests. These situations required them to manage their inner emotions of frustration, exasperation, and perhaps even anger, and instead express patience, exuberance, and excitement. To do otherwise might alienate all of the guests, impacting the consultant’s sales and potentially her reputation as a consultant. Amber discussed the use of emotion work during her interview, and the confusion that some guests had when trying to stay within frame:

I mean they definitely say a lot and you just kind of smile and nod and you know, point them in the right direction of what you think is gonna be the best option for whatever they have revealed to you. Um…you know, because you don’t want to push somebody away and say, you know, “Oh, I don’t want to hear anymore, that’s too personal” because then they’re gonna have this “Well, you know, you made this comfortable atmosphere, you know, ‘that’s too personal, you don’t want to hear about it,’ I don’t understand.” So you want to…There is a fine line because someone may tell you something that is uncomfortable, so you just kind of have to grin and bear it, you know and then when you get in your car you can silent scream and freak out (laugh). Like, “Oh my God, I didn’t need that!”

Amber’s statement shows both the use of emotional labor (“grin and bear it,” and “when you get in the car you can silent scream and freak out”), and also the trickiness of implementing the sex toy party frame for guests. Once they were aware that the level of disclosure within the sex toy party frame was higher than in the medical/informational frame, guests sometimes had difficulty distinguishing between the acceptable amount of disclosure and an inappropriate amount. Consultants told me this quite often, and that they often learned things about guests that they did not really need to know, but they viewed that as part of the job. Sex toy party consultants made an almost ideal example of engaging in emotional labor: if it made people feel better to disclose—even if it made the consultant uncomfortable—then they were willing to allow it.
“I’ve Got Just the Thing for You”: Redirecting Disclosures

Consultants had many other techniques to try to get guests back in frame if they were disclosing too much information or were otherwise disrupting the party. One of the common techniques that consultants used was to encourage guests to hold their questions until they got in the ordering room. Breanne described using this technique with a guest who was disrupting the party by disclosing too much information:

Breanne: Like one lady last night, I promise you, I know her entire medical history. I’m like, “Seriously?” She has endometriosis, her child was a miracle child, you know, and I can’t, and “What’s in this product and what’s in that product?” I sent her a whole ingredient list. I was like, “Ok, can you just kinda like be quiet while I finish this party, and you and I’ll talk…”

Interviewer: This was actually during the party?

Breanne: During the party…so I’m like, “Ok, we’ll talk in the ordering room when we’re one on one, because you’re distracting everybody else.” And it’s the funniest thing, because everybody came in the ordering room, ‘cuz she was the first one, ‘cuz she had to go and pick her kid up or whatever, so she ordered first and left and everybody was like, “Oh, my God, was she not getting on your nerves?” I was like, “Guys, did I do a good job like hiding how I really felt?” (laugh). I wanted to say, “Just shut up.” They were like, “Yeah, you handled it good, you just moved on.”

Again, this example demonstrated how consultants used emotional labor to manage guests who over-disclosed. The key to using this technique was the consultant’s tone when she tried to redirect guests’ questions and disclosures to the ordering room, which I witnessed repeatedly at parties. Consultants always tried to sound upbeat and excited about their demonstrations, no matter what the party environment was like or what was going on in their personal lives. In this case, though, consultants used the same enthusiasm to convey to the guest that she could help them better one-on-one. Melinda displayed this technique to great effect at the party of hers that I observed:

Melinda had just started talking about lubricants, asking the guests who is in control of the lubricant bottle in their bedroom. One of the guests says, “My husband” in an
incredulous tone, as if it was impossible to believe anyone else would control it. Melinda tells them that women “need to take the bottle back” because men use too much lubricant and that it can create a “Slip and Slide” mess, gesturing between her legs. One of the guests says, “I need a Slip and Slide,” and Melinda says, in a slightly secretive and conspiratorial tone, as if she is sharing a secret with the guest: “I got something for you; we can talk about it in the ordering room.”

By making the directive that guests hold their questions until the ordering room sound like they had a special product just for them, consultants managed to subtly control the amount and level of disclosure that occurred during the parties. As discussed in Chapter Six, being able to handle these guests and engage in emotional labor effectively often earned consultants the respect of other guests who were not as patient or tolerant as the consultant.

“I Need a Volunteer”: Getting Guests Who Over-Disclose Involved in the Party

Another common technique that consultants used to control the amount of disclosure and disruptions during the party) was to get those guests directly involved in the demonstration. This would often mean asking guests who were disclosing too much information—especially if those disclosures involved the use of products being demonstrated—to do their own demonstration.

Joy discussed this during our interview, when I asked her how she dealt with guests whose disclosures become disruptive:

Joy: I’ll just be like, again, “This is not kiss and tell,” you know, and I’ll be like, “That’s great, I’m happy for you,” and women usually kind of laugh about it, like, “Oh, that’s just so and so, she’s just havin’ a great old time.” So usually, you know, people are pretty accepting, ‘cuz they know that person and that’s the way they are. I’ve had a couple of times where, you know, someone was kind of over the top and embarrassed…but you know, like I said, I’m like, “All right, settle down, I don’t want to have to use my whip.” So yeah, kind of rein ‘em back in and you know. And there’s women that are just like so over the top, like, “Ok, you know what, you can do this. Let’s hear about your presentation.” You know, and they’ll get up and do the demo for me. Like I said, some of them are…it’s easier for them to sell products to their friends, you know what I’m saying? So, um, you know, I don’t ever want to embarrass anybody, but there’s some times where they’re just talking too much, I’ll just kind of sit down and like…

Interviewer: Right, “Let me know when you’re ready.”
Joy: Yeah. “Go ahead, let it all out, and then when you’re done, I’ll finish” (laugh).

Using guests in the demonstration was not uncommon; many of the consultants had interactive demonstrations that required the use of volunteers. Asking a guest to help lead the demonstration was a way of getting the guest to funnel her energy into helping the party (as Joy said, guests often took each other’s endorsement of products more seriously than they did the consultant’s endorsement). In addition, it helped to silence those guests who were disruptive but did not want to help lead the party, as Candace mentioned during our interview:

But sometimes I’ll just stop and be like, “No, here, you want to come up and talk about it? C’mon up.” And then you do that and they’re like, “Oh, no.” ‘Cuz I told her I needed a volunteer…I said, “I need a volunteer.” I’m like, “Hey, you come on up,” I pulled her out. I usually don’t make people. I pulled her up and she acted like a kitten in front of the whole room. I’m like…and I called her out. I was like, “I called you up here, you’re, you are out there havin’ something to say about everything I’m sayin’ and now you’re up here and you’re acting like a kitten!” I’m like, “I don’t buy it, you know.” And everybody kind of laughed. I turned the table on her.

These techniques worked not only on the offending guest, but it served as a measure of indirect social control for the rest of the guests. By making an example of this guest, Candace was able to demonstrate the consequences of over-disclosure to the other guests that were present. All of these techniques rely on informal social control to get guests back in frame, but by also indirectly demonstrating where the boundaries were and the consequences for crossing them, consultants subtly reinforced the boundaries between public and private information and the boundaries between the pornographic frame and the sex toy party frame.

REJECTING ACCOUNTS: DRUNKENNESS

Attempts to get back in frame or to recover from a problematic event can be either honored or rejected, depending on a number of factors. Foremost among these factors is what Scott and Lyman (1968:53) called “background expectancies…those sets of taken-for-granted ideas that permit the interactants to interpret remarks as accounts in the first place.” These
background expectancies are learned through socialization, and they allow us to interpret social situations and whether or not the account that is offered is appropriate for the violation that has occurred. If it is appropriate, we honor the account and the interaction proceeds; if it is not appropriate, the account is regarded as “illegitimate” and further steps will have to be taken to remedy the situation and correct the inappropriate behavior.

Scott and Lyman (1968:48) argued that because “all actions contain some ‘mental element’” in the forms of “‘knowledge’ and ‘will,’” accounts often contain an argument that an individual did not have complete knowledge of the situation and its consequences, or did not have free will. An appeal to defeasibility (in this case, intoxication) is essentially a defense that the individual’s free will and knowledge were both impaired, which should excuse their actions. This account was the most common one offered for guests’ over-disclosures, and it was usually offered by other guests (i.e., as way of apology to the consultant: “Sorry for her behavior—she’s had too much to drink”) or even by the consultant themselves. In interview after interview, when consultants told me their worst party experiences, these stories usually involved either drunk guests who would repeatedly disrupt the demonstration (usually by interrupting the consultant during her demonstration), guests who disclosed too much personal information, or guests who engaged in sexually explicit behaviors during the course of the party. These incidents were a source of annoyance, if not offense, for consultants, and they also threatened the boundaries of the frame. Like the use of pornographic language, these incidents threatened to “domino” throughout the party if the consultant was unable to control them. Britney described just such a situation, which involved a few guests who had been drinking and quickly slid into the pornographic frame when the party started, eventually disrupting the party completely:

Britney: I had a bachelorette party one time that was on a Sunday afternoon and before the end of the party the girls were passed out on the floor drunk. I was there for six
hours, I made literally, like, almost no money. One girl showed her coochie to everybody
in the world.

Interviewer: Her what?

Britney: Her vagina.

Interviewer: Really?

Britney: Oh my gosh. She, like, we have a [scented body spray] and we like to show, like
I always bring it around and I spray it on everybody’s arm and they can rub it in and it’s
like an oil product.

Interviewer: Right.

Britney: So, I said, “If somebody has a tattoo that they don’t mind showing, if you spray
it on your tattoo, it makes your tattoo shiny.” So I said, “Does anybody have a tattoo they
would like to show everybody?” So I had a girl jump up and run up to the front of the
room where my table, in front of my table and she says, “I do.” And I said, “Ok, great.”
So she grabs the bottom of her sundress and pulls it, I’m not kidding you, to her chin and
holds it there. And she has a tattoo between her boobs and [another tattoo] right like,
where your pocket would be at on your jeans, like right there.

Interviewer: Mmmhmm.

Britney: Like right up under your bikini.

Interviewer: Right, like kind of hip [area].

Britney: Right, she has a tattoo right about there. And she had on no panties.

Interviewer: Oh my god.

Britney: And so then she puts my book over her vagina to cover herself.

Interviewer: No! (Laugh).

Britney: …to cover herself up. Then she, she’s like, “Well, I don’t have any more hands,
because I’m trying to cover myself up and hold my dress up at the same time, so can you
rub it in for me?” I said, “No ma’am, that’s where I draw the line. You can show
everybody you choochoo if you want to, but I will not rub it in for you. Sorry.”

[Britney describes how, at the same party, another guest took a dildo with a suction-cup
base, zipped into her pants, and proceeded to chase other women around the room with
the dildo sticking out of her pants].
Britney: (Laugh). The same girl that put the penis in her pants, she umm laid across the couch and had on like these super short shorts on and I was bringing around some [warming lubricant], and she was like, “You can put it right here,” and pointed to her right below her shorts, on the butt side of her shorts. And she was like, “You can put it right here.” And I said, “No, I need to put it on your arms.” And she said, “No, I really want you to put it right here.” So I was like, “No, I really need to put it on your arm ‘cause you need, you’re gonna have to rub it in, like you can lick it or blow it if you want.” And she said “No. I really want you to put it right here.” She got another girl to rub it in and lick it off the back side of her leg.

Interviewer: Wow.

Britney: Like right at her butt cheeks. I was like “Oh my god.” Finally just got to the point I was just, like if they’re not listening, I just put it back down. And I went on through the party and then I was like, “Ok, so does anybody want to come into the ordering room?” By the time I got to the ordering room, they had one girl passed out in the bed asleep.

Although an extreme situation, this example from Britney’s party illustrated how the domino effect of over-disclosure (and in this case, sexually explicit behavior on the part of guests) could spiral out of control if the consultant did not re-establish the boundaries quickly and effectively. At least two guests at Britney’s party were in clear violation of the boundaries and offered no account or disclaimer for their behavior. Britney offered one for them—they were intoxicated—but she did not seem to accept this excuse as appropriate, given their level of violation. Instead, she was annoyed at having wasted an evening at an unsuccessful and frustrating party.

Though consultants repeatedly offered intoxication as an account on behalf of their guests (or other guests offered it on behalf of the intoxicated guest), during our interviews the consultants often did not seem to honor the accounts, especially in situations like the one Britney described. For her—even though she could laugh about the situation after the fact—there was still a sense of frustration and annoyance in her voice when she described the guests’ behavior and their level of intoxication. Situations where the costs of the problematic event were high for
the consultant and low for the guest seemed to result in a lower likelihood that the consultant would honor the account. Consultants seemed much more likely to accept these accounts if the party was beneficial for them as well, if there were good sales or a new recruit by the end of the party; in addition, honoring accounts offered under better circumstances allowed the consultant to keep a positive relationship with those guests. Otherwise, guests’ accounts seemed to be too little, too late, and the consultant was not particularly interested in helping the guests save face.

CONCLUSION

The use of aligning actions is an important part of all social interaction, but it is also an important part of our understanding of framing and social cognition. Underlying the use of aligning actions are the frameworks and boundaries of appropriate and inappropriate social action. Without these frameworks, there would be no need for aligning actions, because we would never know when we had crossed a boundary and created a problematic event.

Most of the guests at sex toy parties were able to understand and implement the sex toy party frame, so they knew when they crossed a boundary into the pornographic frame or when they disclosed information that was too private. These guests were not difficult for consultants and other guests to deal with, because they easily moved back in frame. Guests who violated the boundary—either because they were not aware of where the boundary was located or because they did not care if they crossed the boundary—presented a greater challenge. In these cases, consultants had to engage in emotional labor in order to re-establish the boundary and allow the guest to save face. This emotional labor and the subtle guidance back in frame also acted as a form of indirect social control for the rest of the guests, further reinforcing the boundaries. In a few short hours, consultants were able to create and maintain an entirely new frame in which guests could talk about disclosures, and managed to do so despite the fact that some guests were
pushing up against or actively crossing the boundaries, both toward the pornographic frame and toward the medical/informational frame. The result, when they were successful (and they usually were), was that all the guests were able to leave the party with their presentation of self intact, the consultant had a successful party, and the guests were educated about sexual products, practices, and sexual health.
CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The primary intent of this dissertation was to refine and extend upon Nippert-Eng’s (2010) theory of privacy. Specifically, I sought to better understand the complicated dance of privacy that we undergo in our social interactions, especially when that dance pertains to the protection of private sexual information. As Nippert-Eng (2010) discussed, the boundaries between public and private information are not natural, nor are they impermeable. In fact, privacy and publicity exist on a continuum, and the boundaries between the two are based on social agreement. Using a cognitive sociological perspective, I wanted to better understand how these boundaries are drawn and defended, especially when the information being protected is regarded by the larger society as deeply private.

Interviewing sex toy party consultants and observing sex toy parties allowed for insight into how the framing of disclosures was essential to understanding whether or not those disclosures were deemed acceptable. Frames, Zerubavel (1991:11) argued, allow us to interpret our social situations because they “[surround] situations, acts, or objects with mental brackets that basically transform their meaning by defining them.” The frame that is applied can alter our understanding of the situation. The same object (e.g., a sex toy) can be viewed as a medical device or an erotic object depending on the frame that is applied, just as a nude figure can be viewed as artistic or pornographic depending on the frame (Ecks 1999).

Frames are also applied to our discussions of private sexual information, and those frames are what help us to determine the appropriateness of our disclosures. In Chapter Four, I argued that very few frames exist that, when applied, transform disclosures of private sexual information from inappropriate to appropriate. The two dominant frames (the
medical/informational frame and the pornographic frame) existed on a continuum of abstractness and concreteness. On the low end of the continuum is the pornographic frame. Discussions of sexuality that occur within the pornographic frame are often explicit and encourage the user to place herself or himself “in the action.” On the other end of the continuum is the medical/informational frame. Within this frame, discussions of sex and sexuality do not seem to focus on the individual’s behavior or desires, but instead on the idea of sex as an abstract concept. Sex toy party consultants worked to develop a new frame—the sex toy party frame—that existed in the middle of the continuum.

By borrowing elements from the pornographic and medical/informational frames, consultants sought to create a new way of understanding disclosures of private sexual information. Consultants were able to construct a new frame through careful construction and maintenance of the boundaries between the sex toy party frame and the other two frames. By presenting themselves as a knowledgeable friend rather than an authority figure and by asking relevant questions, consultants were able to separate the sex toy frame from the existing medical/informational frame. Consultants’ use of anatomically correct terms and their ability to control both body language and the timing of disclosures allowed them to create distinctions between the pornographic frame and the sex toy party frame. Consultants also emphasized the shared experiences of women attending the party and how those experiences were different from men’s. Though these connections served to unite the women and form social bonds between the guests and the consultant, they relied upon hegemonic versions of masculinity and femininity which often went unchallenged by guests. Consultants also managed the party environment very carefully, including controlling the different types of space at the party, the timing of different party elements, and the amount of time guests spent waiting. All of these mechanisms were an
essential part of establishing the boundaries of the sex toy party frame to encourage guests to disclose some private sexual information.

Within the sex toy party frame, discussions of private sexual information were deemed acceptable and appropriate, though guests (and sometimes consultants) violated the sex toy party frame and under- and over-disclosed private sexual information. Guests were sometimes unable to employ the new frame and either did not disclose enough information or disclosed too much information during the party, resulting in the guest being “out of frame” with regards to privacy. Though a number of things could cause a guest to be out of frame (including role strain, discomfort with the products being demonstrated, and drunkenness), it was quite common for guests to be aware that they were out of frame and to use aligning actions to explanation their violations. Aligning actions served as a way to protect the guests’ presentation of self, and consultants usually helped with this protection by honoring the aligning action that was offered. When these explanations were not offered (or were not sufficient), consultants and other guests used a variety of techniques to move the offending guest back in frame. These techniques could vary quite dramatically and included ignoring the offending guest, making lighthearted comments about the disclosure (or lack thereof), or directly confronting the guest. From a cognitive sociological perspective, these techniques were a way of marking and maintaining the boundaries around the sex toy party frame. By subtly guiding an out of frame guest back into the correct frame, consultants reinforced the boundaries of the frame for all of the guests, not just the offending one. This maintenance, though, required considerable emotional labor and constant vigilance on the part of consultants.

Though they did not phrase their responses using the language of cognitive sociologists, most of the consultants I interviewed stated that establishing this frame was one of the most
important parts of their work. Successful implementation of the sex toy party frame meant that guests could have open conversations about sexuality (perhaps for the first time in their lives), and would be more willing to learn about sexual health, the products being offered, and perhaps leave the party with a more sex-positive perspective. In terms of broader consequences, consultants told me that they hoped guests would be more open to discussing sexuality with their sexual partners, which they viewed as the first step to paving the way for more satisfying and empowered sexual relationships for women. Moreover, establishing the sex toy party frame—where discussions of sex were acceptable and were not regarded as taboo or inappropriate—might allow women to establish a better, more sex-positive way of discussing sex and sexuality with their children where sexuality could be discussed without shame and embarrassment.

THEORETICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings from my study have several broader sociological implications. First, this study extends upon existing literature that details how frames are developed and sustained by describing how a frame is quickly and efficiently created (see Ecks 2001; Goffman 1974; Zerubavel 1991; Zerubavel 1997). As Ecks (2001) and Goffman (1974) argued, we use frames to understand the social world, whether or not we are able to clearly explain how we learned about those frames or what their boundaries are. Through the use of observations and in-depth interviews, this research has been able to examine just how those boundaries are constructed and maintained for new users. This dissertation adds to our understanding of the improvisational nature of framing. Though it is likely that many frames are learned over the course of early socialization into the larger culture (see Ecks 2001), this dissertation demonstrates that frames can be constructed and maintained quickly and in an improvised manner. This is significant, from a sociological perspective, because it improves our understanding both the construction of
frames and the malleability and adaptability of frames in different social contexts, for different groups, and over time.

This study also expands our understanding of the social construction and framing of privacy. Nippert-Eng argued (2010) that privacy and publicity exist on a continuum, and this dissertation extends her thesis to discuss a specific type of privacy: private sexual information. In this dissertation, I proposed that existing cultural frames that are used to give meaning to disclosures of private sexual information (the pornographic and medical/informational frames) are adapted and re-shaped during the course of sex toy parties to create a new frame. This frame allowed for a new way to understand disclosures of private information, and created an environment in which those disclosures were (usually) not stigmatized or rejected. This research is among the first to elucidate these frames in detail, and while further research is needed to better understand the existing frames, this research has begun the exploration of frames that are applied to discussions of sexual practices and sexuality.

This study expands upon the notion of being out of frame and the work that is done by individuals and social groups to move those who are out of frame back into the correct frame. Consultants were able to reinforce the frame for both out of frame guests and those who were in frame, even when the offending individuals did not seem interested or invested in the frame management. This extension is important for the broader field of sociology, because framing is an essential part of our ability to understand and interpret any social situation. According to Goffman (1974), when we have misinterpreted or misunderstood a situation, the likely cause of our confusion is the fact that we were applying an incorrect or inappropriate frame. Because these violations can make us look foolish, we must quickly get back in frame in order to preserve our presentation of self. Though Goffman (1974) and Nippert-Eng (2010) offered valuable
theoretical contributions about this process, this research examined specific situations in which people were out of frame with regard to private sexual information. This is significant because of the importance of sexuality to our sense of selves and our identities. A misunderstanding of a privacy frame, especially one about sexuality, could threaten our understanding of an essential part of our lives, and how individuals preserve their presentation of self and sense of self after being out of frame has sociological significance beyond the examination violations of privacy. How we respond to those extreme violations of frame can help us better understand, from a sociological perspective, how we respond to frame violations that are not as severe.

Finally, this research is one of the few existing studies on sex toy parties, and one of the first to include observations of parties as a core part of the research design. Sex toy parties are a social setting that can both challenge and reinforce normative constructions of gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation. Given their popularity, sex toy parties have the potential to create significant change in the structure and institution of gender and sexuality, not unlike the feminist consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s and 1970s. This research indicates some of this change is positive; for example, sex toy parties can encourage women to embrace their sexuality and to become more-empowered sexual beings, which could certainly impact the gendered dynamic of contemporary heterosexual relationships and marriage. Furthermore, the education that women receive at sex toy parties is not simply about lubricants and arousal creams. Guest who attend sex toy parties and who learn to employ the sex toy party frame also learn important lessons about the framing of discussions of sex. When they attend sex toy parties, guests learn that there are a variety of ways to discuss sex, and that sex and sexuality is not something that has to be hidden, ignored, or viewed as shameful (the medical/informational frame), nor is it something that must be discussed in an explicit, pornographic way. Sex toy parties, then, offer a
challenge to the cultural prohibition against discussions of sex, and open attendees’ minds to a new and perhaps more positive way of viewing and talking about sex. On the other hand, they also reinforce hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality and reinforce heteronormativity and heterosexism, which serves to reinforce the existing social structure. Further research (in particular, on the guests attending the parties) is essential to better understand the impact—positive and negative—that sex toy parties might have on the larger society and social institutions such as medicine, the family, sex, and gender. In addition, my research has not addressed the long-lasting impact (if any) that attending a sex toy party has on women’s intimate relationships—both their sex lives and their relationship dynamics in general—though this is an area for future research.

LIMITATIONS

This research contains several methodological limitations, primarily pertaining to sampling issues. First, and perhaps most importantly, my sample is not representative. With the cooperation of sex toy party companies, it might be possible to create a representative sample of consultants (though the frequency with which consultants become inactive might make this difficult). It would be incredibly challenging—if not impossible—to create a sampling frame for party guests. The consultants I interviewed were drawn from company websites and advertisements, through word-of-mouth, and by attending regional training meetings, so my study faces the same challenges as others based on snowball and convenience sampling. In addition, consultants and guests are self-selecting groups; they are likely not representative of the general population. In addition, the consultants and guests I interviewed and observed were located primarily in the Southeastern United States; therefore, my sample is not representative of consultants and guests from other parts of the country. While my sample is racially diverse,
future research could focus on the impact that intersecting identities (i.e., gender, race, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status) have on sex toy party consultants and guests’ ability and desire to employ the sex toy party frame.

My sample represents only three of the national sex toy party companies, and there are also regionally-based companies that I was not able to include in my sample. In addition, the majority of my sample (85 percent) was comprised of consultants from one company. Because consultants’ perspectives on privacy and the appropriateness of disclosure were guided by their company’s suggestions during training, there are likely variations in the techniques used by consultants from different companies. In addition to these sampling issues, I was not able to interview all of the consultants I observed (and vice versa), in large part because of scheduling issues and time constraints.

Viewed as a separate sample from the consultants, the guests I observed presented their own separate sampling challenges. Like the consultants, they probably were not representative of the general population, nor of the larger population of women who attend sex toy parties. Because informed consent from the hostess, guests, and consultant was required before I could attend the parties, the consultants often checked with the hostess during the pre-party planning to see if it would be acceptable for me to attend. When I arrived at the party, I discussed the purpose of my observation and received consent to observe from all of the guests. I was never asked to leave a party because a guest was uncomfortable with my presence, but the pre-planning approval process meant that, on several occasions, consultants asked for permission for me to attend and it was denied. These hostesses often told the consultants that they thought their guests might be uncomfortable with a researcher there, and it is likely that those guests who were unbothered by my presence were different from those who would not permit me to observe.
Finally, as with many different types of observational research, there is always the concern that the presence of a researcher can influence the participants to change their behavior. It was difficult for me to ascertain whether guests were altering their behavior because I was present, though I tried to be unobtrusive and not remind guests that they were being observed. I did notice, on occasion, that some guests seemed hyperaware that I was watching them (e.g., they would talk to me or look at me before speaking to other guests or the consultant). In one case, a guest (who was very outgoing and welcoming to me) commented repeatedly during the party that I should be taking notes because she was offering me “golden” material. These types of occurrences were rare, though, and overall I do not believe many guests changed their behavior because I was there.

Because I had interviewed almost all of the consultants before observing them, I was better acquainted with them and was better able to assess whether I thought they were altering their behavior as a consequence of my presence. In most cases, this did not seem to occur. For example, consultants often told me in interviews that they never disclosed personal information during a party, but during the observation I discovered that they did, in fact, do so. This offers a direction for future research into the meaning of disclosures for consultants. It is possible that after multiple disclosures of personal information (e.g., “this flavor of lubricant is my favorite”), the consultants no longer viewed that information as personal/private. This could explain the discrepancy between their statements in our interviews (“I never discuss my sex life”) and their actions during the parties.

In some cases, though, consultants did change their behavior because I was present. This often happened when consultants started to tell a personal story or anecdote, looked directly at me (sometimes with a sheepish smile), and stopped mid-sentence, stating, “Oh, I’m not supposed
to tell that sort of story.” Usually, though, they continued with the story anyway. One way to assess whether consultants and/or guests changed their behavior because of the presence of a researcher would be to conduct covert participant observation research (unlikely, in light of restrictions on sexuality research from institutional review boards; see Irvine 2012), or to observe the consultant before conducting the interview. Another option would be to observe consultants repeatedly, though it would be difficult to observe the same guests multiple times.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In this dissertation, I explored the social construction of privacy through the venue of sex toy parties, but there are many directions that future research about the social construction of privacy could take. There are dozens of different social settings where private information is revealed, even if the information is not sexual in nature: classrooms and doctors’, therapists’, and counselors’ offices, just to name a few. We reveal private information in our more-intimate social relationships (with family, friends, colleagues, and relationship partners), and the types, amounts, and timing of disclosures that occur within these relationships differ. How we do the dance of privacy and establish and maintain boundaries around our private information within these other relationship is worthy of more sociological study, especially as it pertains to culturally taboo topics (e.g., sex, income, etc.).

In addition to the general notion of the social construction of privacy, more research is needed on the social dimensions of disclosures of private sexual information. How disclosures of private sexual information are framed in different settings is valuable information from a sociological perspective because it illustrates the importance of context in determining the usefulness and appropriateness of particular frames. As discussed in Chapter Four, even in very private places such as doctor’s offices, discussions of sexuality are often regarded as taboo (Gott,
Galena, Hinchliff, and Elford 2005; Herbenick, Reece, and Hollub 2009; Marwick 1999). While this research offers one example of how a frame is constructed and maintained, more research is needed on how privacy frames are developed and how they can be changed or modified.

Very little research exists that focuses on the guests at sex toy parties. The guests’ motivations for attending, their perspective on disclosures of privacy, the benefits they receive from attending, and the knowledge they receive (about gender, sexuality, heteronormativity, and sexual health) are avenues of research yet to be examined. In addition, little research examines the long-lasting impact of attending sex toy parties on women’s intimate-relationship dynamics (sexual and otherwise). How guests actively and passively resist the sex toy party frame and disclosures of private information also is in need of further exploration. Though Ecks (2001) argued that age was one social variable that impacted her participants’ ability to adopt new frames, whether or not this finding applies to frames of privacy warrants further research.

Sex toy parties are an under-studied social setting (for exceptions, see Herbenick and Reece, 2009; Herbenick, Reece and Hollub 2009; McCaughey and French 2001; Storr 2003; Mullaney and Shope 2012), and they offer opportunity to illuminate a myriad of sociological concepts to study. How consultants are drawn to becoming sex toy party consultants, the social relationships they develop with other consultants and guests, and their ability to deal with stigma related to their work are just some of the avenues of research that could be pursued. As discussed in Chapter Five (and by Storr 2003 and Williams and Bemiller 2011), sex toy parties are a social location where norms about sexuality, gender, heteronormativity, and acceptable sexual practices are reinforced and, occasionally, challenged. Given the popularity of sex toy parties, further research is needed on how sex toy parties serve to reinforce traditional views about gender, heteronormativity, sexual desire and arousal, and norms regarding sexual relationships. In
addition, further research is warranted on whether attending sex toy parties can create positive change for guests (i.e., by empowering and educating women regarding their sexuality and sexual relationships).

When I first attended a sex toy party in 2005, it was a fun way to spend an evening and learn about the products being sold. I did not consider the sociological relevance of what appeared to be a moneymaking venture for the consultant and an excuse to hang out with friends for the guests. After spending more than two years examining sex toy parties from a sociological perspective, it is clear that they are much more than a “girls’ night in.” Sex toy parties are sites of contested boundaries: about privacy; about intimate relationships; about appropriate and inappropriate disclosures and sexual practices; about women’s relationships with each other; about gender norms and gendered notions about sexuality. Though the messages women receive at parties are not universally positive and sometimes rely on the reproduction of culturally bound notions of gender and sexuality, sex toy parties are one of the few venues for women to learn about sexuality and sexual practices and to develop more sex-positive perspectives on sex in a comfortable and engaging environment. In addition, they also challenge the existing pornographic and medical/informational frames around discussions of sex and sexuality, perhaps creating incremental social change regarding the taboo nature of sex and sexuality in American culture.
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Sex toy party questions
1. Tell me about the first time you heard about and attended a sex toy party. What happened at the party? How did you hear about the party, and who attended? What did you think of the products being sold—were you familiar with this type of product or party before you attended for the first time?
2. How many sex toy parties did you attend before you decided to become a consultant?
3. What made you decide to become a sex toy party consultant? Did you also consider becoming a Tupperware party consultant, or working in a sex toy shop? Why or why not? Have you ever had this type of at-home sales experience before (i.e., sold Avon or Tupperware)? How is this product/company/party process different from other companies you’ve worked for?
4. What kind of training did you have before you ran your first party? (Probe for details: who conducted the training? What materials were you given for training? Did you feel like the training was adequate? How would you change or improve the training you received? Does your company offer additional training—like in the form of monthly meetings?)
5. What items do you choose to include in your “kit” and why? What do you choose to add or remove when new products are introduced? Why do you choose these items for removal/addition?
6. How much preparation do you do before each party? What do you do to prepare? Has the preparation process changed since you started running parties? If so, how?
7. Do you judge what kind of party it will be before you get there (i.e., “lingerie” vs. “sex toys”)? If so, how do you make decisions about what parts of the product line you will present?
8. Do you prepare for parties differently if you know some/all of the guests compared to if you know none of them?
9. Do you prepare the hostesses for the party? Do you give guidelines about who should/should not be invited, or instructions for how they should prepare guests for what will happen at the party?
10. How early do you arrive for the party? Do you mingle with the hostess and guests before the party begins, or just get down to business? How do you set up for the party? Do you set all the items out before the party begins or reveal them as you go along?
11. Do you think it is important to set a certain “mood” for the party? If so, how do you do this? If not, why is “mood” unimportant? What games do you play to set the mood?
   o Have you had instances in which guests refused to play the game or when the game got out of hand?
12. Please outline the structure of the party—what do you do first? Why is that first? What do you do second? Why do you do things in the order you do? How would things be different if you did them in a different order?
13. Do you think women could sell sex toys to men in a party environment? Why or why not? Do you think men would be able to sell sex toys to women in a party environment? Why or why not? Do you think men would be able to sell sex toys to other men in a party environment? Why or why not?
14. Does the dynamic of a party change if men are present? If so, how does the party change? Why do you think this occurs? If not, why not?

15. What is your best experience at a party? Why was this experience the best? What was your worst experience at a party? Why was this experience the worst?

16. What makes a party great? Why do these factors matter more than others? What makes a party a “dud”? Why do you think those factors matter?

17. What is your most memorable experience while running a party? Why is this so memorable? What is your most embarrassing experience at a party? Why is this so embarrassing?

18. What are the greatest rewards you get from your work? Why are these important to you? What are the greatest challenges you face in your work? Why are these things so challenging, and how do you address them?

19. If you could change one thing about your job, what would it be and why?

Privacy questions

1. Is privacy a concern for you in your work? Do you think your customers are concerned about their privacy? Do you think your work makes you think more about privacy than you normally would?

2. Do you ever feel as if you need to be private or secretive about the fact you sell sex toys? If so, when/with whom does this occur? Why do you feel the need to be private in these situations? How do you achieve this privacy (i.e., hide sales kits from children or parents)?

3. Do you use a separate space for ordering? If so, what type of space do you need? If not, why not? What do you do if there is no private space for the ordering room?

4. What types of questions/comments do guests ask/offer when you’re in the ordering room with them?
   - How do you protect their privacy/confidentiality?

5. How do guests receive the products they purchase from you? Do you try to protect their privacy when delivering products? If so, how? If not, why not?

6. What techniques do you use to get people to participate in the games and in the party atmosphere? How do you get hostesses and guests to “open up” during the party?

7. How much of your own sexual experiences/sex life do you reveal to the guests? Many consultants recommend products to their customers, and describe how the products work/feel…do you do this from your own perspective (i.e., “when I have used this…”) or from other clients’ perspectives (i.e., “lots of women tell me that this product…”)? Why do you use the method that you use?

8. Have you ever had an experience where a guest/hostess was resistant to the party atmosphere/activities and refused to participate? If so, please describe that incident. How did you identify what has happening? What do you do if someone refuses to participate or has a bad attitude about the party? How do you prevent them from damaging the party as a whole?

9. Have you ever had an experience where a guest/host was too involved in the party? If so, please describe that incident. How did you identify what was happening? What do you do if someone is overeager and embarrasses themselves or others? How do you prevent them from doing further damage?

10. Have you ever had an experience where a guest/host revealed too much private information during a party? If so, please describe that incident. How did the other guests
respond? How did the over-sharer respond to the situation? How did you respond? Did it change the atmosphere of the party?
  - Do you think this was an issue of someone discussing something that was too private; or was it a matter of violating others’ privacy (i.e., their sexual partner(s), or because it made other people attending the party uncomfortable?

11. Have you had an experience where a guest/host revealed too much private information at a party and you think you handled the situation well? Have you had an experience where you think you could have handled the situation differently/better?

12. Have you ever had an experience where a guest/host asked you for advice about a personal sexual issue/problem? If so, please describe that incident. How did you respond to them? Why do you think they approached you, rather than someone else?
  - Were you uncomfortable with their disclosure, and if so, did you tell them that? How did they respond? What made you uncomfortable about the situation? Would you still be uncomfortable if a similar situation happened today?
  - Were you comfortable with their disclosure, and if so, why? What advice did you give them?

13. Have you ever had an experience where a guest/host asked you a question that you regarded as private (i.e., about your sex life or sexual experiences). If so, please describe that incident. How did you respond to them? Why do you think they asked you that question?
  - Were you uncomfortable with the question? Why? If so, did you tell them that? How did they respond? Did you answer their question? If so, how? Would you still be uncomfortable if a similar situation happened today?
  - Were you comfortable with the question? Why? Did you answer their question? If so, how? Would you still be comfortable if a similar situation happened today?

14. Are there situations/questions/issues that you think are too private for customers to discuss or do at a party, or with you in the private ordering room? If so, what are these questions? How would you deal with a situation in which that information was revealed?

15. Are there sexual items that you would not consider displaying for people attending a party because you think they are too private to be sold at a party?

16. How has your ability to handle issues of privacy and TMI changed with increased experience?

Questions for experienced consultants

1. When you are training a new consultant, do you specifically address issues of client privacy with them? If so, how? If not, why not?

2. When you are training a new consultant, do you specifically address issues of guests/hosts sharing too much information, and how to handle those situations? If so, how? If not, why not?

3. When you are training a new consultant, do you specifically address issues of guest/host involvement (either over-involvement, or strategies to encourage involvement)? If so, how? If not, why not?
Demographic questions
1. Age at time of interview: ______
2. Race
   a. White
   b. Black/African American
   c. Asian American
   d. American Indian
   e. Hispanic
   f. Other: ____________
   g. More than one race (mark all that apply)
3. Marital Status
   a. Single/never married
   b. Married
   c. Separated
   d. Divorced
   e. Widowed
4. Education
   a. No schooling completed
   b. Did not complete elementary school (through 6th grade)
   c. Did not complete middle school (through 9th grade)
   d. Did not graduate from high school
   e. High school graduate/GED
   f. Some college but no degree
   g. Associate’s degree
   h. Bachelor’s degree
   i. Graduate or professional degree
5. Length of time working for the company: _____ years _____ months
6. (Approximate) number of parties given: _____
7. Number of consultants working “under” you: ______
8. How long had you worked for the company when you recruited a new consultant: 
   _____ years _____ months
9. Estimated annual income from sex toy sales:
10. Estimated amount spent on maintaining sex toy sales business (annually):
11. Estimated annual household income
    a. Less than $20,000 per year
    b. $20,000 to $29,999 per year
    c. $30,000 to $39,999 per year
    d. $40,000 to $49,999 per year
    e. $50,000 to $59,999 per year
    f. $60,000 to $69,999 per year
    g. $70,000 to $79,999 per year
    h. $80,000 to $89,999 per year
    i. $90,000 to $99,999 per year
    j. More than $100,000 per year
12. Occupation (list all forms of employment): ____________________