

Ontology of *The Erotic*

Toward an Applied Theory of Erotic Intelligence

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Cite This Work (APA 7th)

O'Hana, A., & Grasmick, A. (2022). *Ontology of The Erotic: Toward an applied theory of Erotic Intelligence*. [Unpublished manuscript.] University of Western States, Portland, OR:
<https://www.uws.edu/profiles/amy-ohana/>

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge the [University of Western States](#) for support in producing this manuscript. In addition, thank you to the CMHC and SPP Master's and doctoral students in the UWS Er-I Scholars Group who contributed to the thought development within this paper, with special mention to Christine Benincasa, M.S. (in progress) and Jennifer Doctorovich, M.S. Cover photo by [Pixaby](#).

Abstract

Erotic is a word commonly associated with sexuality, but sexuality is not the fullest definition of the word. The Greek root of the word erotic is oneness; *the erotic* has been referred to by scholars and thinkers throughout the ages as a life-giving energy, its presence a crucial role in creating and sustaining love, sex, and work. The use of the term *erotic intelligence* has become more widely used, but its definition has not been standardized nor has construct validity been established. In this paper, we explored *the erotic* through feminist hermeneutic philosophy. We examined four formative texts in which to establish a working definition and basis for theory of erotic intelligence (Er-I), which we applied to the case of Frederick, a crisis mental health therapist. This manuscript is foundational in the development of a theory of applied Er-I, which can be utilized in counseling and consulting settings to optimize human performance and connection.

Keywords: Metaphysics; applied theory; erotic intelligence; feminist hermeneutics; counseling and psychology; sport and performance psychology

Introduction

The word *erotic* is commonly associated with sexuality, but sexual and romantic interaction is not the fullest definition of the word. Erotic is derived from the word Eros, which comes from the Greek verb *eirō* (εἶρω) meaning “to join, tie, or fasten together.” The deepest meaning of this verb is oneness, implying mystical attributes.

Ancient Greece defined Eros as a type of love—passionate love that drives humans to deep connection. Erotic connection is a vital part of sexual and romantic relationships, yet Eros has been clearly differentiated from sexual interaction. In other words, Eros is not sex, but the presence of Eros is important in sex (Plato, trans 1993). The word *erotic* is a derivative of the noun Eros, describing its principles and characteristics.

Sigmund Freud, an early psychoanalytic theorist well-known in Western cultures, is credited for drive theory, namely libido, which is the energy one puts toward an object of sexual interaction. Libido had more to do with self-preservation and the experience of pleasure than love and connection. Like the Greek philosophers, Freud differentiated Eros from libido, referring to Eros as an “all-sustaining” life-force (Freud, 1920, trans 1955). Despite this differentiation, contemporary understandings of the erotic associate more with Freud’s theory of libido than Eros.

Is drive theory the fullest conceptualization of the erotic? Contemporary uses of the word *erotic* most often refer to sexuality and intimate partner relationships, and the current dictionary definition equates *erotic* with sexuality, sexual desire, and/or romantic relationships. However, like thinkers throughout the ages, contemporary scholars continue to refer to Eros as a life-giving force (Gafni & Kincaid, 2017; Perel, 2017), indicating metaphysical attributes to this phenomenon.

Purpose

As life-force energy, Eros is instrumental not just in sustaining intimate partner relationships, but it is also instrumental in human connection and performance beyond the sexual (Freud, 1920; Gafni & Kincaid, 2017; Lewis, 1960; Lorde, 1978; Perel, 2017). Within its original meaning, can erotic energy extend beyond sexual and romantic relationships, into other life tasks such as work and vocation? Can other disciplines, namely counselors and therapists, health care and wellness providers, psychologists, consultants, and performance coaches help clients channel life-force energy into productive and healing means?

The use of the term *erotic intelligence* has become more widely used (Perel, 2017), but this phenomenon has not been operationalized. An exhaustive literature review reveals no standardized definition nor measure of erotic intelligence. As of this writing, the authors of this paper are not aware of any established or tested theory of erotic intelligence. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to explore the phenomenon of the erotic with an intention to gain understanding that will be utilized in the formative stages of theory development that can be applied in counseling and performance settings.

Hermeneutic Inquiry of The Erotic

Developing theory begins by examining patterns and applying critical thought as to why those patterns exist. From there, hypotheses may be generated and tested to arrive at new knowledge which can then be applied. We thus selected hermeneutics as the first method of inquiry.

Hermeneutics is a philosophy of knowing through the exploration of texts or other qualitative sources. It assumes that understanding of human phenomena is meaning-laden; human

knowing is constructed through the context of cultural lived experiences. While this method has been utilized by scholars throughout the ages, primarily in philosophy, theology, and law, it has also been recognized as a credible model of inquiry in the counseling and psychology disciplines (Chang, 2010; Shotter, 2016).

We selected the model of hermeneutics by Hans-Georg Gadamer, who is respected among the social sciences for his model of philosophical hermeneutics. Gadamer's model occurs in four stages: (1) prejudice, (2) tradition, (3) authority, and (4) horizon (Gadamer, 2013), which interact to form understanding of a whole. Parts of the text must be examined both individually and collectively to create understanding, otherwise known as hermeneutical interpretation. The process of examination occurs within the cultural, historical, and literary context of the work (tradition) and is then interpreted within the voice and context of the researchers (authority) to produce knowledge that can be utilized or applied in the present day (horizon).

Researcher Disclosure Statement

Prior to beginning qualitative inquiry, it is important that researchers be aware of and disclose bias. This is in alignment with Gadamer's principle of prejudice, which he quite literally interpreted from the Latin as "fore-judgment" (Gadamer, 2013). Without researcher disclosure, there is greater danger of misunderstanding and misapplying the original meaning of the text. At first glance of the examined texts, we recognized that our fore-existing views on gender, sexuality, and religion may impact our interpretation most. Both authors identify as straight, white, cisgender women (she/her/hers). Both authors have backgrounds in Protestant Christianity, although the primary author identifies as mystical. The primary author is a faculty member in a clinical mental health counseling program at an integrated health sciences university and the second author is a doctoral student in sport and performance psychology at the same university.

We acknowledge that our interpretations are impacted by our privilege of living and working during an age and culture where women's voices are more often encouraged rather than suppressed, especially in academia. The texts examined in this study do not reflect the same privilege for women. As educated women scholars, our interest in this topic is to contribute new knowledge through creative methodology, understand more fully a phenomenon that piques our interest as professional women, and glean principles that we can apply in professional practice as professional counselors and doctoral-level sport and performance consultants. We acknowledge our responsibility to filter personal bias influenced by privilege through the language and norms of the authors of the examined texts. We intentionally did so through the hermeneutic circle.

The Hermeneutic Circle

Gadamer's (2013) hermeneutic circle engages researchers in a process of examining the whole through the lens of its parts. Both the whole (the entire text) and its parts (sentences, paragraphs, sections, and individual words) cannot be fully understood without the context of the other. The process of examination is reflexive, filtered through critical examination of the cultural, historical, and literary understanding of both the original author(s) and the interpreters (researchers).

This process of inquiry prompted us to conduct a search of texts, both ancient and contemporary, to explore the context and meaning of the words *Eros* and *erotic*. We discovered that this phenomenon is widely referenced cross-culturally and cross-disciplines. Thus, our first task was to delimit sources. At this early stage of exploration, we selected four sources whose predominant theme was to examine the ontology of the erotic. These sources represent a diversity in perspectives by gender, sexuality, religion, genre, and date written as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Ontology of The Erotic: Sources Examined

Source	Author	Race & Gender Identity	Sexuality	Religion	Genre
<i>The Symposium</i> (385 BCE, trans 1993)	Plato	European Males	Straight, Gay, Pederasty	Polytheist	Philosophy
<i>Beyond the Pleasure Principle</i> (1920, trans 1955)	Sigmund Freud	European Male	Straight, Progressive	Atheist	Academic, Scientific
<i>The Four Loves - Eros</i> (1960)	C. S. Lewis	European Male	Straight, Heteronormative	Monotheist Christian	Academic, Literary
<i>Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power</i> (1984)	Audre Lorde	American Black Female	Lesbian	Mystic	Academic, Literary, Feminist

We engaged the hermeneutic circle by exploring the following questions about each source:

1. What are the phenomenological underpinnings of this text? Prior to the actual reading of the text, we wanted to understand the culture, history, and lived experiences of the author(s), particularly their gender, sexual orientation, and religious identities.
2. What are the parts of the text relevant to our guiding question: What is the meaning of the word *Eros*, or its derivative *erotic*?

3. What is the meaning of those parts, in context to the culture, history, and phenomenology of the author(s)?
4. How does the meaning of these individual parts connect to bring understanding (meaning) of the text as a whole?
5. What insight does the text's whole meaning bring to our guiding question: What is the ontology of the word *Eros* or its derivative *erotic*?

The Symposium

The Symposium, contained in the *Dialogues of Plato* and dated approximately 385-370 BC, is an Ancient Greek text and is perhaps the oldest written record of the word Eros. The text is a dialogue between elite, educated men at a private drinking party wherein they give encomium to Eros, their deity of love and desire.

Symposium begins in a raucous manner, praising Eros, a “great god,” the oldest and most powerful of the Greek deities. Eros was described being present since the beginning of time and instrumental in the formation of the natural world. Eros gave men virtue and valor—“Eros, then, is a name for the desire and pursuit of wholeness” (Plato, trans 1993, p. 133). Through Eros, men could possess beauty and goodness, primarily through the act of sex.

The discourse of Socrates, an influencer of the Symposium, comes almost directly from Diotima of Mantinea, referred to as a wise woman who is not present at Symposium. Socrates' discourse shifts the conversation. Whereas the men of Symposium initially praise Eros as a source with which to obtain self-gratification, Diotima's shares that Eros is Divine. It is an energy that is both natural and supernatural—a channel for humans to reach the gods. Socrates concluded that Eros is a highly desirable thing for men to possess:

“...that one would not easily get a better partner for our human nature in acquiring this possession than Eros. Therefore, I say that every man should honor Eros, and I myself

honor and surpassingly devote myself to the things of love and summon others to do so ...
(Plato, trans 1993, p. 157).

Phenomenology and meaning. Ancient Greek culture was a juxtaposition of progressive thinking and patriarchal tradition. Misogynistic attitudes—as well as open hostility toward women—were prevalent, observable in culture, writing, and art. Men and boys were educated in math, science, philosophy, and the arts, whereas girls and women were typically educated in music, dance, and homemaking. Women were the property of men and were often given in marriage as young teenagers. Married women were expected to manage the home and raise children, having limited rights and freedoms beyond this role. Men often sought romantic and sexual love outside of the marital relationship.

The sexual orientation of the men of Symposium is unknown, although there are many references to both heterosexual and homoerotic love. The practice of pederasty was prevalent in Ancient Greece—a close relationship between a man and a younger boy, where the adult man acted as a mentor to educate the boy on worldly interactions and initiation into manhood. These relationships were often sexual.

The discourse of Symposium initially reflected masculine themes: power, valor, and the act of sex. There is an overarching polarity of Eros as “good” and “bad,” “desirable” and “vulgar.” Good Eros is desirable because it leads to the attainment [possession of] beauty. Eros is a tool to help men achieve superior status, which includes self-gratified happiness.

Despite this, Eros was differentiated from sexual and romantic love. “For we know there is no Aphrodite [the Greek goddess of sex and beauty], no sex, without Eros. If then there were but one Aphrodite, Eros would be one, but since in fact there are two, Eros is necessarily also two” (Plato, trans 1993, p. 120). Eros was associated with sex, but it was not seen as solely sexual. There is more to Eros than a mere tool (possession) to achieve a desired outcome.

Though the culture was clearly misogynistic, it is the voice of a woman (Diotima) that gave Eros a deeper context. Eros contains a duality of existence within both the natural and metaphysical realms – “over everything both human and Divine” (Plato, trans 1993, p. 126). As a channel to bring together separated things, Eros an energy that goes beyond the physical (sex) to the metaphysical (love). Erotic energy is the foundation of wholeness, the receiver of which experiences satisfaction of the natural cravings (sex, romance), social status, and privilege as well as fulfillment on an existential (meaning-making) or spiritual (Divine) level.

Beyond the Pleasure Principle

Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920) is an essay by Sigmund Freud, where he discussed his human drive theory. Freud believed that humans have two basic drives – Eros, the life drive, and Thanatos, the death drive, which exist in paradoxical conflict and harmony, the tension of which conflict is necessary for survival and evolution. This essay expanded Freud’s theory of pleasure as the motivating drive of humans to self-preserve and to find satisfaction. His observations post World War I revealed a theory regarding the dark energy of Thanatos (the death energy) and its impact on aggression and destruction.

Freud used the term Eros [translated] approximately seven times within this essay. The primary focus was to examine the concept of Thanatos, more specifically how this energy manifested into human behavior. At all uses of the word Eros, Freud referred to it as life instinct: “Our speculations have suggested that Eros operates from the beginning of life and appears as a ‘life instinct’ in opposition to the ‘death instinct’ which was brought into being by the coming to life of inorganic substance” (Freud, 1920, trans 1955, p. 61). Eros was described as the opposite drive of Thanatos; Thanatos of which manifested into narcissistic libido, or the drive toward self. Narcissistic libido, governed by sadism, ultimately was destructive. “But how can the sadistic instinct, whose aim it is to injure the object, be derived from Eros, the preserver of life?” (Freud,

1920, p. 54). Eros, the life instinct, was pivotal in evolution, growth, and development, differentiated from the act of sex but present in libido (the drive to engage with a sexual object). According to Freud, libido can be narcissistic or non-narcissistic, although he did not go into depth about non-narcissistic libido in this essay.

Phenomenology and meaning. Sigmund Freud was a highly educated, White male. Though a Jew by ethnicity, he identified as an atheist and scientist. He was well-read in Greek mythology, poetry, and anecdotal stories, of which he referred later in the essay. He rejected these anecdotes as non-scientific, although he openly admitted he did not know the source of the life-drive, nor was he committed to firm belief in his theories within the essay. As a scientist, his theories appeared to be influenced by the emerging theory of evolutionary biology of the time, and his language often inferred a sense of disgust of the puritanical Victorian culture in which he lived.

There is a pervading sense of dualism within this essay, where two human, “meta-psychological” drives co-exist in conflict, each seemingly attempting to overcome the other. Like Plato, Freud described Eros as an “all-sustaining” life-drive fostering creativity, beauty, and joy. Eros was associated with the sexual drive, or libido, but was not libido itself.

The Four Loves – “Eros”

The Four Loves (1960) is a book written by C. S. Lewis, a British theologian and literature professor. *The Four Loves* is a discourse on the nature of love, Eros being one of the four types named by Lewis: (a) Storge—Affection love, (b) Phileo—friendship love, (c) Eros—romantic love, and (d) Agape—Divine love. Dedicating an entire chapter to Eros (Chapter V), Lewis described the erotic as a “state of being in love...the kind of love in which lovers are in” (Lewis, 1960, p. 117). Lewis was influenced by ancient Greek philosophy, and like ancient Greece, he conceptualized Eros as passionate love.

Lewis' aim of *The Four Loves* was to clarify love and how it is expressed in relationships. He defined Eros as a love fundamental in sexual and romantic relationships, but he also described it as an energy that went beyond (marriage) and sexuality. Sex could be merely a biological or evolutionary act, such as in arranged marriage, without the presence of Eros. Though Eros is “the voice of élan vital or Life Force” (p. 139), Lewis described a darker part of it as an “evolutionary appetite” (Lewis, 1960, p. 139). There can be a raw, dark desire within Eros that can bring harm, and he referenced trafficking and rape as examples, but he then noted that these forms of sex occur in the absence of true eroticism.

Phenomenology and meaning. Lewis was an educated, White, straight, Christian male. He was a prolific writer, authoring many books and essays on the topics of Christianity and philosophy. He also was a lecturer and public speaker. *The Four Loves* emerged from his public radio addresses, controversial for the time because of the open discussion of love, marriage, and sexuality.

As a person of privilege, Lewis' perspective influenced the cultural status quo. His work reinforced the heteronormative view of the day. In the 1960s, views of marriage as a method of contracted survival were beginning to shift into marriage motivated by romantic love. His discourse on the erotic was taboo for the time and audience, as he was frank about sexuality within romantic relationships. Like Freud, he was likely influenced to some degree by the burgeoning study of evolutionary biology, but his work appears most influenced by his Christian faith.

Lewis described marriage (romantic love) as a mirror of Divine love—God's love for humans. Within an intense and committed relationship, both parties are called to express true Eros. This “delighted preoccupation” infers a purity within true eroticism, which is a love consumed with the wholeness of a person; the need for the whole person is greater than the sexual need.

Pleasure was secondary in pure Eros, although it is a natural byproduct of all-consummate, passionate love. This type of love mirrored how Lewis believed God loved humans.

The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power

The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power (1984; 1978 first publication) is an essay written by American writer and poet, Audre Lorde. Lorde identified as a Black, lesbian feminist whose work aimed to eradicate social injustice, especially around race, gender, and sexual orientation. This essay is about power, a predominant focus of feminism—and the erotic, or erotic power, which she identified as women’s deepest power.

Phenomenology and meaning. A Black, lesbian, feminist poet living during the early American civil rights and feminist movements, Lorde was no stranger to racism, sexism, and homophobia. Lorde exposed a malevolent use of the erotic by the privileged, naming their method as a source to control and oppress women while continuing to benefit through their own self-gratification and pleasure.

Lorde believed that though women are oppressed, they do have power through the erotic, although that power is hidden and manipulated by the patriarchal status quo. According to Lorde, the erotic is a female and spiritual resource, but it is untapped by most women. Those in power [men, the patriarchy] have taught women to separate the erotic into what is purely sexual. She asserted that the erotic goes beyond the sexual as the “life-force of women,” (Lorde, 1984, p. 55), which is instrumental in women’s creativity, productivity, and joy.

Like scholars before her, Lorde conceptualized the erotic as a form of all-powerful and all-consuming love, yet she expanded her definition to include a “creative energy empowered”—an energy primordial to fulfillment, joy, and equality for women.

[The erotic is] the personification of love in all its aspects—born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony. When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as

an assertion of the life-force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge of use of it which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives. (Lorde, 1984, p. 55)

Lorde described two uses of erotic energy. The predominant use of it is by the in-power (patriarchal) status quo. This erotic energy is sensation-oriented and fundamental in egoic sexuality (e.g., pornography), which she believed was the antithesis of what is truly erotic. In contrast, Lorde described the most authentic use [experience] of the erotic, which is associated with deep and transcendent emotions.

Lorde's call does not dismiss the erotic; instead, she admonished women to understand it. The erotic is an experience of deep feeling which includes passion (e.g., love and sex) but is also instrumental in other transcendent feelings (joy, bliss). Erotic energy supersedes the act of sex in that it is instrumental in reaching one's highest potential, which includes work. The joyful manifestation of erotic energy leads to productivity and freedom—the highest good of women.

Yet “women so empowered are dangerous” (Lorde, 1984, p. 55). Women empowered with the knowledge of erotic energy have the ability to change power structures—a viable threat to those who hold power. Lorde believed women could and should use their erotic energy as a vehicle for social change, ultimately benefitting humanity as a whole. Yet this use of power does not come in a traditional [masculine] method of aggression or control; instead, it comes through engaging a [female] creative source (Lorde, 1984).

Discussion

Attributes of The Erotic

The purpose of this paper was to explore the phenomenon of the erotic. We aimed to explore attributes of the erotic, beginning with the phenomenon of Eros, which appears within a diversity of texts throughout the ages. Four primary yet divergent sources, representing authors with varying gender identities, religious affiliations, and sexual orientations, written in different time periods and genres, revealed four important themes:

- *The erotic is a metaphysical energy concerned with life or aliveness.* All four of the examined sources used terminology of “life-force” to describe Eros or the erotic, which is consistent with the opinions of contemporary writers (Gafni & Kincaid, 2017; Perel, 2017). The erotic is a primordial energy (metaphysical) which influences human behavior (physical).
- *A duality to the erotic.* All four sources described a dualistic nature of the erotic: a side that is “Divine,” benevolent, or “pure,” and a side that is selfish, egoic, or wielded for the gratification of one’s personal power or pleasure. These enlightened and dark attributes of the erotic may create conflict within the individual. The erotic is concomitant to sex and sexuality, but it is not sexuality itself.
- *The erotic as passionate love.* Derived from Eros, the Greek deity of passionate love, the erotic is a love that drives one to join (engage in deep connection) with the beloved (either a person or object). It is a powerful force, and it is difficult to control.
- *Erotic connection begets transcendent emotion.* Through the process of engaging erotic energy, during or immediately after the moment of consummation, humans experience

feelings of joy and bliss, of which creation (the birth of something new) is often associated.

There are Divine or spiritual connotations to this transcendence.

Implications

Our hermeneutic exploration indicated a clear divergence from Western culture's understanding of the erotic as solely sexual. As metaphysical energy, the erotic influences behavior; it is not behavior itself. The drive of erotic energy is toward connection with a beloved (oneness), but this drive is not always to sexual interaction. The current sociocultural focus on the erotic as solely sexual is problematic because it negates the fullest capacity of this phenomenon. Understanding and engaging erotic energy effectively holds implications not just for relationship counseling or procreation/parenting, but also for endeavors that involve creativity and productivity such as work, vocation, sport, and hobbies.

As life-force energy, the erotic is pure power. Its drive is passion, which is associated with human emotion. As a result, erotic energy may override reason and logic, creating destruction (Thanatos) when the original intention was love (Eros)—it is “born of Chaos” (Lorde, 1984, p. 55). Perhaps this is the dark side of the erotic referred to by Lewis: “But Eros, honoured without reservation and obeyed unconditionally, becomes a demon” (1960, p. 141), what Freud termed “narcissistic libido,” and what Plato referred to when describing Eros as a desirable possession for self-benefit. Researchers and practitioners need a model to understand erotic energy, particularly the benevolent attributes of it. The attributes of erotic energy revealed in this present study imply that it is possible for humans to use this phenomenon to achieve personal goals as well as build society in prosocial ways. These latter ideas could be the formation of “erotic intelligence,” which contemporary psychoanalyst Esther Perel (2017) described as balance of passion and safety. However, a credible theory of erotic intelligence (Er-I) must be formed and tested to apply a construct empirically.

The most important implication in the present work concerns justice, safety, and equity of humans, particularly those that are marginalized, oppressed, and surviving in dangerous environments. As we consider the current status of the world—increasing war and conflict, global pandemic, climate change, and social unrest among other issues—we must bravely consider how erotic energy, typically thought of as self-desirable or pleasurable, ultimately may contribute to human suffering and demise. In other words, if the erotic is two experiences—enlightened and/or dark—what is the role of dark Eros (what Freud termed narcissistic libido) in social injustice and how can enlightened Eros (what Lewis termed pure or true eroticism) be utilized to create justice? What is the responsibility of the privileged—those with access to education and resources—to develop awareness of and benevolently facilitate erotic power to establish equity? Indeed, the call to awareness and action here is simply a restatement of Audre Lorde (1984). Within privileged structures, there is still much more to learn—and do.

Erotic Intelligence: Theory Applied

The differentiation of the erotic from the solely sexual lends insight into the theoretical development of Erotic Intelligence (Er-I), particularly for models of human helping, consulting, and coaching. Our findings here inspire new questions: Can mental health professionals, sport and performance psychology consultants, and life coaches utilize a theory of Er-I to help clients transcend their circumstances and reach their highest potential?

Let us consider the case of Frederick, a fictitious character but one that could represent a typical professional experiencing work burnout, performance issues, and addiction. Frederic, a man in his late 30s, is a crisis mental health therapist who works swing shift in the emergency room of a local hospital. Frederick often sees patients in acute mental health crises (suicidal or homicidal

ideation, often comorbid with substance intoxication or overdose) who have sought stabilization by their own volition or who were brought in by a loved one or the police. Fredrick has worked in this role for seven years, and while he initially loved the job and the satisfaction of helping others, in the past 12 months he has found himself physically exhausted, sarcastic and uncaring about the patients he sees, and experiencing a general sense of hopelessness. His supervisor has recently pointed out that Fredrick made several mistakes with documentation in the hospital's new medical records system, which puts the department out of compliance with risk management. After work, usually around 1 or 2 a.m., Frederick "decompresses" by drinking a bottle or two of wine, watching several hours of TV, and masturbating to internet pornography. While he denies moral conflicts regarding these "vices" (as he describes them), he admits to his own mental health therapist that ultimately these behaviors make him more depressed and that he "just wants to feel good again."

Through our present exploration of the erotic, we conceptualize Frederick's lived experience in this manner. Whereas Frederick may truly meet the diagnostic criteria for Major Depressive Disorder or an anxiety disorder, which are medical diagnoses based on psychopathology (e.g., the *DSM-5*) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), we conceptualize his core issue as the loss of erotic energy—particularly a block of aliveness, or an imbalanced presence of Eros and Thanatos. We ask the question: "Frederick, when was the last time you *felt truly alive*?"

Frederick self-reports problematic use of alcohol and media, which is likely an attempt to rest and recover from work. His job occurs in a system of dysregulation – patients with psyches and souls in peril within a system that may not always support effective interventions or long-term health. As a result, Frederick becomes disconnected within himself (e.g., disconnected from his purpose, meaning, and fulfillment he used to derive from work). He also becomes physically

exhausted and begins making mistakes. What the health care profession terms “self-medicating” through alcohol and media, we conceptualize his addictive behavior as an attempt to reinvigorate the erotic energy he has given away at work. That he is using these stimuli for rest is not the problem; indeed, these stimuli could be considered erotic by the culture (particularly the use of pornography). However, do the stimuli themselves lead to a sustained feeling of aliveness (Eros), or is the main intent self-pleasure (a function of narcissistic libido)? It appears to be the latter in Frederick’s estimation, as his use of alcohol and media soothes his pain and reignites a spark of energy. However, Frederick also recognizes that the continued use of these stimuli ultimately has resulted in feelings of depression and hopelessness (his destruction, as per Freud). From a theoretical model of erotic energy, we ask the question: “Frederick, what creates deep connection within your psyche, and how can you engage more in that stimuli when you are not at work?” Instead of a spark or two, we want to help Frederick rebuild a sustainable fire of passion and hope, which will *keep him alive*.

Frederick may or may not have difficulty identifying how he experiences deep connection. At one time, he perhaps felt that connection through his work, which is often the experience of Western, performance-based culture. Frederick is privileged not only in his position as an educated male, but also in that he has access to resources to pursue a career he loves. Yet, his love for his career has waned (though likely this occurred, in part, from stressors beyond his control). Through a model of Er-I, we understand that love is formative to passion; passion is a drive toward a beloved. Our goal as counselors or performance consultants would be to help Frederick identify qualities of his work that he loves, in which he can direct his energy to while at work. If this is not possible given the intensity of work stressors, we would help Frederick identify new work in which he could *fall in love with*.

Finally, we utilize transcendent feelings, such as joy and bliss, as a measure of Frederick's progress. Asking him to track these deep emotions, we measure what exactly creates these feelings and how he experiences them. This documentation quantifies the helping intervention, providing data to ensure the fidelity of Frederick's progress. Ultimately, the goal is not to alleviate Frederick's depression and addiction, as is often the goal in traditional psychotherapy or coaching. Neither is the goal to improve his performance to acceptable levels. The goal is to help Frederick achieve his greatest potential while helping him experience transcendent emotion to his fullest. In this state, Frederick feels *reconnected and whole*, of which physical energy, mental wellness, and productivity is a natural byproduct.

Considerations in theoretical advancement. As we consider the case of Frederick, it is important to remind the reader that Frederick is not a real case nor was this discussion an application of an actual theory. It was the beginning of a conversation—a conceptualization—of how the attributes of the erotic, derived here from our hermeneutic exploration, could be applied to a mental health counseling or performance scenario.

A primary consideration in the theoretical development of Er-I is that the erotic has a very strong metaphysical and spiritual component. Deviating from the traditional medical model of assessment – diagnosis – treatment may not align with the current expectations of evidence-based practice nor be culturally appropriate for some populations. We acknowledge this consideration, and we call for further study on the erotic. As mentioned previously, while there are many sources on the erotic from a variety of cultures and genres, there is little to no scientific study. Theoretical development utilizing a variety of methods acceptable in the social sciences (including construct validation and hypothesis testing) to develop the construct of Erotic Intelligence (Er-I) is needed. Hermeneutic and meta-analytic studies, as well as quantitative methods, will be foundational in establishing construct validity. It is possible to establish construct validity of a metaphysical

phenomenon—Emotional Intelligence (EQ) and Spiritual Intelligence (SI) (Dash & Patnaik, 2015; Vancea, 2014) are examples. Gardner’s work (1983) supports the development of multiple intelligences, with which Er-I aligns.

Additionally, the clear mystical or “Divine” element of the erotic suggests a spiritual connotation, which may not be relevant for some populations. To maintain cultural competence, researchers and practitioners of Er-I should not avoid this spiritual attribute, but rather acknowledge it at the forefront as a matter of informed consent. Qualitative and feminist research acknowledges all facets of alignment (or bias, as per positivist and post-positivist epistemological understanding) and seeks to co-construct knowledge through them. The Spiritual and Religious Competencies (2022) published by ASERVIC, or the Association of Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling, may guide us here.

Ontology of The Erotic: Reflexive Process & Conclusion

As qualitative researchers, we engaged in a reflexive process wherein we examined our interpretations, filtering them again through the phenomenology of the examined texts. Our first awareness was that three of the four texts were written by men through a masculine phenomenology that wrestled with the duality and the darkness of Eros. For example, the discourse of *Symposium* initially reflected Eros with stereotypical masculine attributes of power, valor, and the act of sex. There is an overarching polarity of Eros as “good” and “bad,” “desirable” and “vulgar,” which is also echoed in Freud and Lewis’ texts. In this lens, the erotic is a tool to help men achieve superior status, which includes their self-gratified happiness. It is women’s voices that expand the attributes of Eros as benevolent, on a spiritual or Divine plane. This theme is evidenced in the wisdom of Diotima (Plato) and explicitly stated in Lorde’s (1984) essay. As researchers, we

examined the thought development within each text and noted a similar, contemporary cultural overlay of the understanding of the erotic. In today's language and experience, many hear the word erotic and equate it with sexuality—a biological response. It requires a deeper wisdom to fully understand the depth and power of life-force energy, which is reflective, heart-centered, and intuitive.

Throughout time, women's voices have not been well represented in historical artifacts. Despite the masculine phenomenology in which three of the examined texts were written, the male authors highlighted stereotypically feminine attributes of beauty, joy, and bliss within the erotic. These transcendent “deep feelings” were strongly reinforced by Lorde, who named the erotic as “deeply feminine” (1984). Thus, like Diotima and Lorde, we have come to understand the erotic as contextually feminine.

As educated women researchers in the social sciences, we acknowledge that our interpretations occur through a feminist lens. We wrestled with the patriarchal overlay of all four texts, particularly with the idea that the benevolent, metaphysical, or spiritual attributes of the erotic have been suppressed by the male status quo for their benefit. We celebrated the voices of Diotima and Audre Lorde because they were feminine influences—voices that changed, and have the potential to change, the dominant, patriarchal status quo. Even so, we must acknowledge this process of exploration as our bias. We welcome other (and all) voices to deepen our collective understanding here.

It is impossible to know the true meaning of authors as we read their writings; hermeneutic researchers can never fully remove ourselves from their words. Yet, we can emphasize the highest theme of each source, and collectively agree upon these themes as principles for a greater human good. The erotic, at its best, is a highly desirable, “all-sustaining” (Freud, 1920), metaphysical energy. It is beauty embodied and associated with love; it is that which fosters creativity and

connection, ultimately leading to joy and bliss. There is an auxiliary darkness to the erotic—a power that must be harnessed; a mystery to be explored. Like a womb, the erotic is a sacred place deep within all of us, not only necessary for survival, but for creating one's fullest life.

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