Resolving Social Problems Associated with Sexuality: Can a “Sex-Positive” Approach Help?

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Social work, in addition to many other professions, remains very concerned with resolving and preventing various problems associated with sexuality. Social workers commonly may be involved in treating victims and perpetrators of sexual abuse, dealing with client personal issues concerning sexuality and sexual functioning, and advocating for policies that empower and protect individuals who are vulnerable. Sociosexual issues are serious and may affect many people, thus it is necessary to explore important possibilities of addressing such issues effectively. It appears that considering a broad “sex-positive” approach from which to understand sexuality may be useful in helping to resolve major sociosexual problems. Despite its potential benefits, a sex-positive approach has yet to be substantively used in social work.

WHAT IS A SEX POSITIVE APPROACH?

In his classic work addressing sexual variation, Bullough (1976) considered societies as being sex positive or sex negative. Sex-negative societies encourage sexual asceticism, and sex is largely constructed as being particularly risky, problematic, or perhaps adversarial. Sex negativity is linked not only to prejudices associated with various sexual practices, but also to sexism, racism, homophobia, and ageism (Glickman, 2000). However, a sex-positive approach is more encompassing; it also emphasizes the pleasurable, rewarding, and nonprocreative aspects of sex. A sex-positive approach recognizes the tremendous cultural diversity in sexual practices (see Bullough, 1976; Popovic, 2006), while also acknowledging substantial variation in personal meanings and preferences. In discussing sexual diversity, it has been noted that, too often, cultural forces are given “lip service” but not serious attention in understanding sexual practices (Bhugra, Popelyuk, & McMullen, 2010).

A sex-positive approach means being open, communicative, and accepting of individuals’ differences related to sexuality and sexual behavior. Sex positivity is not about having frequent sex or condoning sexual activity per se. From a sex-positive perspective, one person may choose to abstain from sexual activity, whereas another may choose to engage in frequent and diverse sexual experiences. In other words, a sex-positive approach is about allowing for a wide range of sexual expression that takes into account sexual identities, orientations, and behaviors; gender presentation; accessible health care and education; and multiple important dimensions of human diversity. In this sense, sex positivity is consistent with the World Health Organization (2004) position that sexuality is shaped by interactions of biological, psychological, cultural, social, economic, political, legal, ethical, historical, and religious and spiritual factors. Each person is unique when considering the complex intersectionality among dimensions of human diversity. Because sexuality is connected to such dimensions, sexuality for each person is also unique.

Because human sexuality and its expression are so diverse, it is important that the topic of sex can be discussed in an open, respectful, and nonjudgmental manner. From a sex-positive approach, talking about sex is not substantially different from talking about any other topic. When sex is a taboo topic or when it is talked about in whispers or hushed tones (signs of sex negativity), it severely restricts the range of human diversity generally and contributes to marginalization and othering. Regarding sexuality, a fundamental question for social work and other helping professions is: How can society prevent and resolve substantial social problems involving sexuality when sex cannot be discussed openly, honestly, and safely in the first place?
SEXUAL MINORITIES AND EMPOWERMENT

Many social workers are familiar with the history of oppression and social injustice toward people with same-sex attraction. Although progress has occurred, instances of prejudice and discrimination toward people with homosexual, bisexual, and pansexual orientations continue. Working to reduce social injustice toward these sexual minorities remains an important goal for social work.

Unfortunately, additional sexual minority groups are commonly misinterpreted and marginalized. For example, studies show that participation in consensual sadomasochistic activities cannot be explained by an underlying psychopathology but is best understood as an alternative erotic preference (for a thorough review, see Powls & Davies, 2012). Despite such research (and ethical admonitions to respect client diversity and self-determination), studies have shown that many mental health clinicians hold biases against clients with alternative erotic preferences (Hoff & Sprott, 2009; Kolmes, Stock, & Moser, 2006). A sex-positive approach challenges traditional understandings of erotic practices, along with exposing heterosexist and mononormative biases. From a sex-positive perspective, people have more options to enjoy and express consensual sexuality, with less fear of negative judgment, in ways that best fit them.

SEX EDUCATION AND EQUALITY

A sex-positive approach has much to offer about how school sex education could be improved. The United States has very high rates of teenage pregnancy, childbirth, and sexually transmitted infections compared with many countries (Kirby, 2007). Furthermore, a sex-negative sociopolitical climate has led to disparities in sex education curriculums. A report by the Guttmacher Institute (2012) noted that 37 states require that information on abstinence be provided, and 18 states require instruction on the importance of engaging in sexual activity only within marriage. According to the Guttmacher report, only 13 states require that sex and HIV education programs are medically accurate, and only nine states require that programs provide instruction that is not biased against any race, sex, or ethnicity.

Although hundreds of millions of federal dollars have been spent on programs that focus only on abstinence, meta-analytic research shows that these programs do not have a significant effect on sexual behavior, whereas comprehensive programs (those that encourage both abstinence and condom/contraceptive use) can delay onset of sexual activity and increase condom use (Kirby, 2007). Despite the effectiveness of comprehensive sex education programs in reducing teen pregnancy and increasing condom use, it has been pointed out that current programs also, inadvertently, reinforce inequalities of race, class, gender, and sexuality (Connell & Elliott, 2009). More directly, current sex education is rooted in sexual negativity and privileges dominant versions of white, middle-class, cis-gendered (male or female gender identity constructed as exclusively opposite), heterosexual, monogamous, and reproductive-focused sexuality. As a salient example, Elia and Eliason (2010) have called attention to harmful messages of abstinence-only—until-marriage sex education programs to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youths. Exactly what do these programs offer these youths? Not only is a more inclusive range of acceptable sexuality avoided in the classroom discussion, but state-sanctioned marriage is not afforded to all.

REDUcing SEXUAL OFFeNces

Few social issues evoke emotion and widespread public response comparable to sexual offending. Sexual offending in its various forms is a serious matter that warrants careful exploration into possible causes, effects, and successful ways to reduce and prevent it. However, sex negativity provides a social climate for myths concerning sexuality to develop and proliferate. The development and promotion of common myths concerning sexual offenders and their treatment (that is, sex offenders are the same, nearly all will reoffend, sex offender treatment is ineffective) has been thoroughly documented (Quinn, Forsyth, & Mullen-Quinn, 2004). Unfortunately, many social workers and law enforcement professionals believe these myths, which are promoted through media and serve powerful political interests.

Large meta-analyses challenge myths concerning high recidivism rates and ineffectiveness of treatment. The federal Center for Sex Offender Management (2001) reported that sex offender recidivism rates are lower than those of other classifications of offenders. Using meta-analysis, Alexander (1999) found that across 79 studies (representing nearly 11,000 offenders), the rearrest rate for sex offenders was 7.2 percent, compared with
17.6 percent for untreated offenders. Marshall, Marshall, and Serran (2006) conducted a thorough review of studies on sex offender treatment efficacy and concluded that sex offenders can be effectively treated. Recent studies have shown that social policies restricting sex offender residency near parks and schools have no effect in reducing recidivism (that is, Duwe, Donnay, & Tewksbury, 2008; Maguire & Singer, 2011). Sadly, sex offender registration and notification laws can have harmful effects on family members of offenders. Levenson and Tewksbury (2009) found that children of sex offenders are likely to be teased and ridiculed at school and far more likely to experience depression, anxiety, fear, or anger.

A sex-positive perspective does not condone sexual abuse or violence, nor does it minimize the harm of sexual offending. However, because sex positivity encourages discussion and critical exploration of sexuality and sexual practices, it can be helpful in addressing myths and moral panics concerning sexual offending issues. In regard to child victimization specifically, a sex-positive approach may help prevent some cases of sexual abuse. Children who are educated about their bodies and are not afraid to talk about them, consistent with sex positivity, are less likely to be targeted for potential sexual abuse. Put more directly, many sex offenders know that children who are fearful of talking about sex will likely not report sexual abuse; children who are educated and empowered will.

**CONCLUSION**

Social problems involving sexuality are diverse and bring significant emotional and monetary costs. As a profession, social work is committed to working with other disciplines to resolve these problems and prevent harm that is subsequently incurred. Although specific sociosexual issues have received considerable attention from social work scholars and practitioners, the broader social and cultural climate, in terms of sex negativity or positivity, wherein these diverse issues are embedded has not been critically examined. The broader social and cultural context connects these issues and, although largely unnoticed, forms a framework through which such issues are interpreted and understood. By moving from a sex-negative framework toward a sex-positive approach that is consistent with professional values, social work is in a better position to help resolve social problems that are associated with sexuality.

**REFERENCES**


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Everyone Can Be Motivated

In all psychological and educational approaches, it is required in one way or the other that the client is motivated. This gives rise to the motivation paradox: those in most need of help receive the least support, or the converse: those who have the least need of help obtain most support.

To make matters worse, personnel who work with the most unmotivated clients often have the least resources at their disposal. This phenomenon may be called the personnel paradox.

Motivational Work describes a method which solves both the motivation paradox and the personnel paradox.

No-one is a hopeless case. It is possible to motivate all clients. It is not necessary to require motivation to be able to help somebody.
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