

JOURNAL OF POSITIVE SEXUALITY

Volume 1, February 2015

Published by Center for Positive Sexuality Non-Profit Organization

THE JOURNAL OF POSITIVE SEXUALITY is a multidisciplinary journal focusing on all aspects of positive sexuality as described in the Center for Positive Sexuality purpose statement. It is designed to be accessible and beneficial to a large and diverse readership, including academics, policymakers, clinicians, educators, and students.

FOUNDING CO-EDITORS

D.J. Williams, Idaho State University (U.S.)
Emily E. Prior, Center for Positive Sexuality (U.S.)

PRODUCTION EDITORS

Andrew Robertson, Los Angeles (U.S.)
Karen Sabbah, California State University, Northridge (U.S.)

EDITORIAL BOARD MEMBERS

Audrey R. Giles, University of Ottawa (Canada)	Richard Sprott, Community-Academic Consortium for Research on Alternative Sexualities (CARAS) (U.S.)
M. Candace Christensen, University of Texas at San Antonio (U.S.)	Staci Newmahr, Buffalo State College (U.S.)
Jennifer A. Vencill, University of Minnesota (U.S.)	R. Todd Hartle, Biology and Education, Irvine, CA (U.S.)
Jeremy N. Thomas, Idaho State University (U.S.)	Wendy Walters, Central Washington University (U.S.)
Karen Neill, Idaho State University (U.S.)	William B. Strean, University of Alberta (Canada)
Moshoula Capous-Desyllas, California State University, Northridge (U.S.)	

SPECIALIZED CONSULTANTS

Deneen L. Hernandez, FBI National Forensics Laboratory
Jay Wiseman, Author and Educator

MANUSCRIPT SUBMISSION

Please see SUBMISSION GUIDELINES on the inside back cover for specific guidelines regarding manuscript submissions. Manuscripts should be submitted as an email attachment in Microsoft Word to submissions@journalofpositivesexuality.org. Any questions or correspondence may be sent to the co-editors at info@journalofpositivesexuality.org

JOURNAL OF POSITIVE SEXUALITY

Volume 1, February 2015

The semi-annual Journal of Center for Positive Sexuality, a 501c3 non-profit organization.

Table of Contents

Empowering Voices, Building Bridges, Creating Solutions.....	4
Introducing a Multidisciplinary Framework of Positive Sexuality	6
Does BDSM Power Exchange Among Women Reflect Casual Leisure?	12
Responding to Academic Critiques of Sex Work	16
Submission Guidelines.....	21

Empowering Voices, Building Bridges, Creating Solutions

D J Williams and Emily E. Prior
Editors

We are delighted to present the very first issue of the *Journal of Positive Sexuality!* We would like to thank our outstanding editorial board and our many volunteers at the Center for Positive Sexuality for their efforts in helping to make this new project a success. Our vision is for *JPS* to be an open, multidisciplinary forum where people from diverse social roles and positions can access and share quality, peer-reviewed information pertaining to any aspect of positive sexuality. We welcome submissions from academics, practitioners, administrators, students, and professionals from diverse backgrounds and disciplines on any topic pertaining to positive sexuality.

There has been considerable interest and curiosity about *JPS*, especially because it is not structured like a traditional academic journal. Articles are relatively short, cover a full range of topics and genres, and are written for a broad and diverse readership. Indeed, the purposes of *JPS* are to empower many voices, build bridges across professional contexts, and encourage people to work together to help create solutions to social problems involving sexuality. We hope that our concise, understandable articles will increase *JPS* readership and participation, while also promoting widespread practical application of sex-positive knowledge.

While sexuality is ubiquitous in Western society, much of our culture, particularly in the United States, reflects degrees of sex-negativity. Strong sex-negative attitudes often tend to empower some voices but silence many others, restrict communication

about sexuality and sexual behavior, and marginalize those who do not conform to normalized sexual scripts. Popular sex-negative attitudes and beliefs among the masses play out daily in various social settings, including contributing to how our youth are educated about sexuality, how laws and policies are formed that govern sexual behavior, and how our society addresses and responds to sexual violence. These effects, realized or not, have substantial consequences to the lives of many citizens.

Many scholars have observed significant problems that have occurred from policies, however well-intentioned, that are rooted in sex-negativity. Abstinence-only sex-education among youth has been both costly and ineffective. Even comprehensive sex education often reflects salient cultural biases, while having little to say about healthy sexual identities and diverse sexual expression. At the same time, adults who enjoy alternative consensual sexual relationships and/or alternative sex practices continue to be at risk for marginalization and discrimination. A growing number of recent studies also show that current sex offender policies, rooted in widespread popular myths and moral panic, are often ineffective and sometimes seem to increase, rather than decrease, risk for recidivism. Laws have become sufficiently strict that the occasional youth who is “caught” sexting may end up in the criminal justice system and chronically labelled as a sex offender.

The above examples illustrate major problems with laws and policies rooted in widespread sex-negativity, which is characterized by fear and the lack of open, honest communication. An important underlying question is: How can a society expect to have socially-just, effective policies concerning sexuality when sexuality

is not openly and honestly discussed in the first place? It cannot.

We recognize that sex-negativity and positivity are not dichotomous but seem to be opposite ends of a continuum.

Furthermore, specific locations within a broader culture also seem to vary in this respect. Nevertheless, positive sexuality that is rooted in open and honest communication, human diversity, inclusion, compassion, self-determination and empowerment seems to hold promise in creating effective solutions to several contemporary social

problems. Indeed, there is much to explore both theoretically and practically within positive sexuality, and there is tremendous potential for realizing many societal benefits that adventurous exploration may bring!

With this introduction, welcome to *JPS*! We hope you enjoy our current and future articles and that you find them useful within your personal and professional roles. We now invite you to join with us in empowering voices, building bridges, and creating solutions.

Introducing a Multidisciplinary Framework of Positive Sexuality

D J Williams, PhD
Idaho State University and Center for
Positive Sexuality

Jeremy N. Thomas, PhD
Idaho State University and Center for
Positive Sexuality

Emily E. Prior, MA
Center for Positive Sexuality

Wendy Walters, PhD
Central Washington University

Introduction

In this article we will introduce the concept of *sex-positivity*, or *positive sexuality*, before proposing a multidisciplinary framework that identifies key dimensions of positive sexuality as an approach to understanding and addressing a full range of sexuality topics and issues. Indeed, the *Journal of Positive Sexuality* focuses on this theme and its potential theoretical and practical benefits.

Four decades ago while writing about sexual variation, Vern Bullough (1976) referred to societies as being more or less sex-positive or sex-negative. Since then, the term *sex-positive* has been debated from diverse, and sometimes oppositional, theoretical positions. While there are many who may commonly assume that sex-positivity simply means having a *pro-sex* stance on various socio-sexual issues, we believe that sex-positivity, or positive sexuality, may be a more fitting term that perhaps better encapsulates notions of diversity, empowerment, and choice. Sex-negative perspectives tend to frame sexuality and sexual practices primarily as risky, difficult

to manage, and perhaps adversarial; while variations of sex-positivity seem to acknowledge risks and concerns yet also emphasize the importance of sexual pleasure, freedom, and diversity.

A social climate of sex-negativity has been linked to numerous social problems, including homophobia, sexism, ageism, racism, marginalization of sexual minorities, deficiencies in providing sex education, and ineffective policies in addressing sexual offending (Glickman, 2000; Williams, Prior, & Wegner, 2013). Therefore, we believe that there may be considerable value, both theoretically and practically, in exploring positive sexuality as an approach to addressing a range of diverse sexuality issues.

Scholars and professionals likely have their own definitions and variations of what sex-positive means. We see this as healthy and productive. While sex-positivity may be understood differently among scholars and professionals, it is likely that some of the key ingredients of positive sexuality, including those mentioned above, are consistent across definitions. Moreover, we further propose that a positive sexuality framework may be beneficial in helping to guide sex research, practice, and education.

Key Dimensions of a Positive Sexuality Framework

After thoroughly considering a multidisciplinary social and behavioral science literature, we propose eight key dimensions that provide a basic structure for a positive sexuality framework. This framework may be helpful in addressing a wide range of topics and issues pertaining to sexuality, and the dimensions should be very familiar to most readers.

“Positive” Refers to Strengths, Wellbeing, and Happiness

Traditional methods of addressing a vast range of social issues focus on deficits. Typically, assessments are conducted, problems and deficits are identified, and interventions are prescribed in order to correct such deficits. This process has been, and still is, common across multiple disciplines, including education, health and medicine, psychology, counseling, and social work. However, for well over two decades, scholars have recognized that specific individuals, families, and communities have numerous inherent strengths (for a review, see Saleebey, 2009). These strengths can be identified and then utilized to resolve problems. A strengths-approach requires a shift in how we relate to people—we strive to empower them based on their existing capabilities. The task is not to identify what people are doing wrong and then to add something external to correct it (deficit approach), but to recognize the things that people do, or have done, well, along with the underlying, contributing strengths that allow for success. We can then help people apply their particular strengths to resolve problems. Our purpose, then, is to nourish and support people’s interests, motivations, resources, and emotions in helping them meet their needs and goals, thus leading to more happiness and better quality of life (Saleebey, 2009).

At the same time that social workers and counselors were beginning to develop a strengths-based perspective, Martin Seligman and others in psychology were conducting research on characteristics and attributes that bring happiness and satisfaction to people. They realized the immense value in learning about factors and conditions that contribute to people thriving, achieving success, feeling fulfilled, and

attaining well-being. Their pioneering work led to the emergence of positive psychology as a new area of inquiry, and positive psychology has quickly grown and flourished (see Linley, Joseph, Harrington, & Wood, 2006).

For us, positive sexuality, similar to positive psychology and a strengths perspective, includes the recognition that people have an assortment of personal strengths and also unique sexualities. People are capable of drawing from their existing strengths to resolve problems and be happier and more fulfilled, including developing their sexual identities and expressing their sexuality. Positive sexuality, then, is concerned with how people are, or can be, happy and fulfilled with their unique sexualities and sexual expression, which contributes to their overall wellbeing and quality of life.

Individual Sexuality is Unique and Multifaceted

Positive sexuality also begins with the recognition that each person’s sexuality is unique and multifaceted. Drawing on the World Health Organization’s (WHO, 2006) definition, we observe that sexuality involves a diverse array of aspects including roles and identities, preferences and orientations, relationships and activities, pleasures and desires, scripts and fantasies, as well as values and beliefs. These aspects are shaped by the “interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors” (p. 5).

One of the implications of this is that sexuality is shaped by factors both internal and external to the self. Hence, people often experience some aspects of their sexuality as relatively given and fixed, while other aspects may be experienced as much more

fluid and malleable (Diamond, 2009). It is important to understand, though, that what is fixed and what is fluid varies significantly both from person to person as well as across the life course as people not only make conscious choices to change their sexuality, but also as they inhabit new contexts and participate in new situations that inevitably also lead to change (Sassler, 2010).

What we discover, then, is that each person has a unique sexual history that contributes to, and helps provide, that person with a unique sexual narrative (Plummer, 1995). In turn, most people find that these narratives form an integral part of who they are, both through the interaction that these narratives have with other characteristics and dimensions of the self, as well as through the role that these narratives play in the development of a person's overall sense of identity (Brottoa, Heiman, & Tolman, 2009). Accordingly, positive sexuality not only begins with the recognition that each person's sexuality is unique and multifaceted, but also with an appreciation of the ways that each person's sexuality contributes to the whole of who that person is.

Positive Sexuality Embraces Multiple Ways of Knowing

Sexuality has been explored and interpreted from diverse disciplines, epistemologies, methods, and theoretical frameworks. Positivist, postpositivist, critical, postmodern, and poststructural approaches now shape the production of knowledge across many disciplines. More than ever before, scholars are recognizing the value in utilizing a wide range of methodological approaches to more thoroughly understand their topics. Each approach, of course, may have specific scholarly criteria associated with it and will yield unique understandings.

Indeed, over a dozen years ago, Gergen (2001) explored how multiple and diverse methods may coexist to enrich and revitalize psychological science. Since then, mixed methods research designs are being applied to single studies with much more frequency. Also, far more methodological diversity among scholars is acknowledged and embraced. In discussing "the queering of anarchism," Shannon and Willis (2010) used the term *theoretical polyamory* to suggest that drawing from multiple theories is especially valuable in better understanding and addressing complexities of the politics associated with institutionalized domination and control. At the same time, newer artistic methods of inquiry, referred to as *creative analytic practice* (Richardson, 2000), are regularly used across a range of disciplines. Regarding positive sexuality, we believe there are substantial benefits to welcoming a full range of diverse research approaches to learn how people can be empowered and fulfilled regarding their sexuality and wellbeing.

Positive Sexuality Reflects Professional Ethics

Most professions that interact with the public have a code of ethics to guide decision-making, and in particular, to prevent actions based on self-interest, and to prevent discrimination and injustice. For example, the American Bar Association and the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants require putting clients first, and accountants have the added utilitarian requirement of serving the public good ahead of serving their clients.

In the helping professions, there are specific ethical principles and formal codes of conduct that allow for the expression of self without fear of discrimination. According to the American Psychological Association

(2010), the first ethical principle of the profession is that psychologists should not only do no harm, but they should strive to benefit those with whom they work in any setting, including research, teaching, and clinical practice. Psychologists are required to respect “cultural, individual, and role differences” among people (p. 4). The *Code of ethics* of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2008) argues against self-interest to the point of offering pro-bono work so as to benefit others, and states that social workers not only recognize and respect differences, but seek out those differences. Social workers are admonished to “obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression” with respect to numerous aspects of diversity, including sex, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression (p. 3). Other helping professions, including counseling (American Counseling Association, 2005) and medicine (American Medical Association, 1996), also value human diversity, client self-determination, cultural sensitivity, and social justice. Positive sexuality is consistent with established professional ethical principles and seeks to protect against self-interest and discrimination. Positive sexuality also promotes what is just and right; that is, honoring the voice, needs, choices, experiences, and life of every individual.

Positive Sexuality Promotes Open, Honest Communication

Being sex positive means going beyond basic reproductive biology and being free to discuss a full spectrum of sexual attitudes and behaviors. Not only does this include communicating one’s needs and wants from a sexual perspective, but also recognizing that communication and negotiation are essential to positive sexual interactions and outcomes. Even though open

communication about sex is not the status quo in current American culture, many books and articles, both in pop culture and in academia, discuss good communication as being the key to a happy and healthy sex life (i.e., Noland, Manning, & MacLennan, 2010; Shpancer, 2014).

It is also important to note that open communication about other topics that may or may not be directly related to sex per se should be encouraged. Allowing for freedom of language, concepts, and ideas that may differ from our own or current social norms can help establish trust and safety that are necessary for personal growth and wellbeing.

Positive Sexuality is Humanizing

A sex positive approach acknowledges diverse problems associated with sexuality and seeks to help resolve them, but it does not use language that devalues people. While it is true that sometimes people can engage in problematic, even atrocious, behavior, people are still human beings. Therefore, our position is that language should not dehumanize or demonize. Terms that contribute to stereotyping, function to establish in-group versus out-group behavior, imply that sexuality and related behaviors are unclean or unhealthy, or stigmatize are not consistent with positive sexuality.

Unfortunately, common discourses allow derogatory language that reflects widespread sex-negativity. This can be easily recognized with terms like “fag” or “whore” but may not be as obvious when terms and phrases like “tranny,” “sexual predator,” “war on sex,” “sissy,” “girlie,” or “I’m ‘clean’” are used. Many of these terms (i.e., tranny, sexual predator, sissy, girlie) are used as identifiers and denote a negative

connotation. Some such terms make a clear distinction between acceptable identities (i.e., masculine) and unacceptable identities (i.e., feminine). Other derogatory terms are used to predispose the audience to feel a certain way about a topic (i.e., war on sex) or to clearly distinguish oneself from a group or category that is unwanted (i.e., clean versus dirty).

Sex positive language, on the other hand, seeks to reflect social justice and inclusiveness. Using terms that are inclusive and promote social equity and cultural salience allows all identities and experiences to be respectfully acknowledged.

Positive Sexuality Encourages Peacemaking

The use of humanizing language is directly connected to the notion of peacemaking. Over the course of his long and distinguished academic career, Hal Pepinski (2002, 2013) has drawn from knowledge and wisdom across diverse cultures and social spaces to assemble a theory of *peacemaking criminology*. While peacemaking applies to community and societal issues (including to promote healing via restorative justice), Pepinski (2013) also sees it as a self-discipline. He suggests that people must find their own path to making peace. According to Vitello (2003), people are invited to explore their own personal emotional pain, so that they can then better understand the pain of others, which often contributes to problematic, sometimes even atrocious, behavior. While violence is a reaction to emotional pain and fear, peacemaking centers on compassion and love (Pepinski, 2013). Peace happens when people feel safe and accepted.

Sex-negativity seems to be driven largely by fear, along with perceived threats of actual

or potential pain. A common response to such fear and threats is to try to exert control and/or fight. Nevertheless, peace requires self-control, careful listening, empathizing, and learning. In criminology, peacemaking requires an ability to let go of trying to make crime go away, rather than exerting more control (Pepinski, 2013).

Many American social issues, including those involving sexuality, are saturated with war-making language. We commonly speak of the *war* on drugs, a need to *combat* human trafficking, *fighting* for sexual rights, and so forth. Indeed, the birth of the *Journal of Positive Sexuality* arose in large part as an attempt to facilitate peace in the midst of ongoing “sex wars” that began way back in the 1980s. Thus, an important dimension of positive sexuality is to work to better understand the pain and difficulties of others, work to empower all voices, and to build bridges. The language of positive sexuality should reflect inclusion and peacefulness. In addition to celebrating human diversity, it is important to stay mindful of our common humanness.

Positive Sexuality is Applicable across all Levels of Social Structure

Because sexuality is an integral part of who we are as people, it thus permeates, directly or indirectly, all aspects of human life. Positive sexuality, then, is relevant across all levels and types of social structure. At the micro level, many individuals struggle with how to understand and express their unique sexualities. The history of sexuality in western society is steeped in negativity, thus many people may feel guilt and shame regarding their sexual curiosities and desires. Many younger people have difficulty establishing their sexual identities or successfully merging their sexuality with other aspects of their identities. At the

mezzo level, various sexuality issues are not uncommon, of course, in families and small social groups. Finally, as suggested earlier, positive sexuality may have tremendous potential in helping to resolve important social problems in neighborhoods, organizations and workplaces, and communities (Williams, et al., 2013).

Conclusion

We believe that the landscape of positive sexuality is fertile, and that it has tremendous potential for theoretical and practical exploration and discovery. Furthermore, we propose that positive sexuality shares several important elements with established social and behavioral sciences. Our positive sexuality framework presented here is an attempt to help map this expansive landscape. Our hope is that a positive sexuality framework can be valuable in understanding and exploring all areas dealing with sexuality, including sex education, sexual identities, sex work and erotic labor, pornography, diverse sexual behaviors and practices, sexual violence prevention, and much more, in an open, inclusive, and humanistic manner.

References

- American Counseling Association. (2005). *ACA code of ethics*. Alexandria, VA: Author.
- American Medical Association. (1996). *AMA code of medical ethics*. Chicago, IL: Author.
- American Psychological Association. (2010). *Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Brotto, L. A., Heiman, J. R., & Tolman, D. L. (2009). Narratives of desire in mid-age women with and without arousal difficulties. *Journal of Sex Research, 46*, 387-398.
- Bullough, V. L. (1976). *Sexual variance in society and history*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Diamond, L. M. (2009). *Sexual fluidity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gergen, K. J. (2001). Psychological science in a postmodern context. *American Psychologist, 56*, 803-813.
- Glickman, C. (2000). The language of sex-positivity. *Electronic Journal of Human Sexuality, 3*. Retrieved from: <http://www.ejhs.org/volume3/sexpositive.htm>
- Linley, A. P., Joseph, S., Harrington, S., & Wood, A. M. (2006). Positive psychology: Past, present, and (possible) future. *Journal of Positive Psychology, 1*, 3-16.
- National Association of Social Workers. (2008). *Code of ethics*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Noland, C., Manning, J., & Maclennan, J. (Eds.) (2010). *Case studies in communication about sex*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Pepinski, H. (2002). A struggle to inquire without becoming an un-critical non-criminologist. *Critical Criminology, 11*, 61-73.
- Pepinski, H. (2013). Peacemaking criminology. *Critical Criminology, 21*, 319-339.
- Plummer, K. (1995). *Telling sexual stories: Power, change, and social worlds*. New York: Routledge.
- Richardson, L. (2000). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 923-948). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Saleebey, D. (Ed.) (2009). *The strengths perspective in social work practice (5th edi.)*. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Sassler, S. (2010). Partnering across the life course: Sex, relationships, and mate selection. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 72*, 557-575.
- Shannon, D., & Willis, A. (2006). Theoretical polyamory: Some thoughts on love, thinking, and queering anarchism. *Sexualities, 13*, 433-443.
- Shpancer, N. (2014). Why aren't we talking to our partners about sex? *Psychology Today*. Retrieved from: <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/insight-therapy/201403/why-arent-we-talking-our-partners-about-sex>.
- Vitello, C. J. (2003). Stalking laws, therapeutic jurisprudence, and peacemaking criminology: A radical law-psychology inquiry. *Journal of Forensic Psychology Practice, 3*(2), 1-37.
- Williams, D J, Prior, E. E., & Wegner, J. (2013). Resolving problems associated with sexuality: Can a "sex-positive" approach help? *Social Work, 58*, 273-276.
- World Health Organization. (2006). *Defining sexual health: Report of a technical consultation on sexual health*. Geneva, Switzerland: Author.

Does BDSM Power Exchange Among Women Reflect Casual Leisure? An Exploratory Qualitative Study

Emily E. Prior
Center for Positive Sexuality

D J Williams
Center for Positive Sexuality and Idaho
State University

Introduction and Background

Various practices involving consensual bondage and discipline-dominance and submission-sadomasochism (BDSM) are typically interpreted from discourses pertaining to sexuality, which has historically been understood and regulated by science, medicine and psychiatry (Foucault, 1978). However, despite that normalizing discourses have relegated BDSM practices to the “outer limits” (bad, abnormal, unnatural, damned) of human sexual behavior—in contrast to the “charmed circle” (good, normal, natural, blessed), which includes heterosexual, monogamous, married, and “vanilla” forms of sex (Rubin, 1993)—scholarly reviews show that BDSM cannot be explained by psychopathology (i.e., Powls & Davies, 2012; Weinberg, 2006; Williams, 2006). Research further shows that BDSM participation is not motivated by underlying antifeminist attitudes (Cross & Matheson, 2006; Prior, 2013) or being abused as children (Sandnabba, Santilla, Alison, & Nordling, 2002).

While research shows that BDSM participation is not associated with psychopathology, a few recent studies have suggested that there may be psychological benefits for some people who regularly participate. A national study in Australia ($N=19,307$) found that males who regularly

participated in BDSM scored significantly lower than other men regarding psychological distress (Richters, de Visser, Rissel, Grulich, & Smith, 2008). A recent study in the Netherlands found that BDSM participants ($n=902$) scored significantly higher than matched controls ($n=434$) on several measures associated with psychological health (Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013). The psychological benefits reported in these large studies are consistent with benefits associated with leisure experience.

Scholars have recently suggested that BDSM may be understood as leisure experience (Newmahr, 2011; Williams, 2006, 2009; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013). Leisure is difficult to precisely define, and may be understood as activity, time, or setting, but scholars agree that it is intrinsically motivated, freely chosen, and is associated with psychological benefits, such as producing pleasure or enjoyment, positive emotions, reduced stress, sense of adventure, and expressing important parts of the self (Kleiber, Walker, & Mannell, 2011). Leisure studies, as a unique field, is rooted in sociology and social psychology, and addresses the “who, what, how, and why” of meaningful, enjoyable leisure experiences. Although western culture seems to be predicated on work and career, leisure experience is essential to a healthy and fulfilling lifestyle.

Although more research is needed, it appears that understanding BDSM as legitimate leisure experience may account for a wider range of BDSM experiences, motivations, benefits, and possibilities. While sexuality discourses are certainly relevant to understanding BDSM, there are some BDSM activities (among some participants) that are not necessarily experienced as, or motivated by, sexuality or

eroticism. A leisure perspective can account for these phenomena, while at the same time, scholars recognize that sex practices (and erotic BDSM) may also be understood as leisure (Attwood & Smith, 2013). In other words, a leisure perspective seems capable of explaining a wide range of BDSM experiences that may or may not be sexually motivated.

Leisure activities can be classified along a continuum from casual to serious (Stebbins, 1997, 1999). Casual leisure has been described as being an “immediately rewarding, relatively short-lived, pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training to enjoy it,” (Stebbins, 1997, p. 18). Casual leisure is often playful and spontaneous, and involves “doing what comes naturally” (p. 18). In contrast, serious leisure includes the need to persevere; is career-like (having stages and turning points); requires significant personal effort based on acquired knowledge, training or skill; provides durable benefits and rewards; is associated with identifying with the activity; and has a unique ethos and social world (Stebbins, 1999).

While scholars have explained that a BDSM lifestyle fits criteria for serious leisure (Newmahr, 2011, Williams, 2006, 2009), the possibility that such practices may reflect elements of casual leisure has not been explored. However, Taylor and Ussher (2001) found that BDSM participants in their study used words such as “playful,” “fun,” and “an escape from the ordinariness of life” in describing their experiences, which is consistent with casual leisure. Therefore the purpose of this pilot study was to explore, qualitatively, whether BDSM experiences were associated with a common aspect of casual leisure, play.

Methods

Both authors are scholars and members of the BDSM community. The first author utilized a form of snowball sampling to interview nine adult women who were highly involved in the BDSM community in Los Angeles County. The first author is also an active member of the Los Angeles BDSM community, thus authenticity, trust and respect were established among participants. Participants were White and ranged in age from 22 to over 60 years. Regarding sexual orientation, six participants identified as bisexual, bicurious or queer; one identified as lesbian; one identified as straight; and another identified as unsure about her sexual orientation at the time of the interview. The sample, although small, included dominants, switches, submissives and slaves and reflected a wide range of BDSM interests. The sample for this pilot study came from a separate ethnographic study originally conducted by the first author (Prior, 2013).

Participants were asked, “Is playfulness and fun interconnected with SM power exchange?” If participants responded affirmatively, they were then asked, “How so?” The interviewer also asked follow-up questions to gain clarification as needed. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The authors then analyzed transcripts using line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 2000) to explore relationships among codes and to identify key themes from findings.

Findings

Participants reported that play and fun are important, if not essential, aspects of BDSM participation. Several participants frequently used words such as “silly,” “laughing,” “giggles,” “fun,” and “playful” to describe many of their scenes. Furthermore, some

descriptions reflected other attributes of casual leisure, such as spontaneity in engaging in specific behaviors during a scene and doing what seems natural.

A major theme from the data centered on how attributes of casual leisure in BDSM seems to connect participants' adult identities with the playfulness, silliness, fun, and creativity commonly experienced during childhood. One participant explained that, "there's been aspects of Disneyland brought up in a scene (and) some of my paddles have Disney characters on them." She added that she "had actual (children's) toys for (BDSM) toys." A participant who enjoys frequent pet play, which for her is often "fun and silly," stated that such play is "a huge aspect of my relationship (with her life partner) and my identity." One of the older participants reported that over time there has been "an increasing childlikeness in my walking through life." For participants in this study, BDSM as casual leisure seems to connect adult identities with healthy characteristics and experiences of childhood.

Another theme that emerged from the data, perhaps not surprisingly, involved how playful, fun, and enjoyable attributes of BDSM are directly linked to specific BDSM identities (i.e., dominant, switch, slave). Although this study utilized a small sample, there were variations in how casual leisure attributes were experienced according to BDSM contexts and roles. For example, switches described experiencing important casual leisure attributes, in different ways, across both dominant and submissive aspects of their participation. In contrast, a participant who is strictly dominant explained that although sometimes humor, silliness, and spontaneity are present in her scenes, she must still "focus and pay attention because I have to read somebody's body language and what they're (sic)

feeling." A participant who identifies as a 24/7 slave reported that while she is "extraordinarily playful," and her playfulness is often "irreverent" both inside and outside the BDSM community, she does not "do" play as something separate from her identity. She added, "I am always slave." For her, her 24/7 slavery and her playfulness are understood as complex natural expressions of her unique self.

A third theme from our findings involved physical and psychosocial health benefits that participants derive from BDSM. One participant reported that, "...for me a lot of BDSM is lighthearted and enjoyable and it provides a sort of outlet for all of the stress that I have to deal with." Another participant stated that for her, BDSM is a form of preferred play, and that play is "essential to being a balanced person." She further added that it keeps her "youthful" and "being in the moment." A participant who identifies as dominant believes that adding play and fun to BDSM power exchange sometimes may be necessary "in order for those that are involved to grow from the experience."

Summary and Conclusion

Despite that participation in BDSM activities is termed "play" by the BDSM community, scholars have conceptualized it primarily as serious leisure without yet exploring how it may, at times, also be casual leisure. Although this exploratory study utilized qualitative data provided by a small sample of participants, our findings suggest that BDSM participation may sometimes reflect qualities of casual leisure, such as playfulness, spontaneity, doing what comes natural, and childlike fun (Stebbins, 1997). Our findings suggest that (a) attributes of casual leisure seem to provide specific benefits to participants that are consistent with leisure generally; (b)

attributes are linked to specific BDSM identities (i.e., dominant, switch, submissive slave, etc.) in how they emerge within BDSM contexts; and (c) casual leisure attributes connect participants' adult identities to their positive childhood experiences that involved casual leisure.

It appears that BDSM may reflect qualities of both serious and casual leisure, though the extent of each likely depends on specific roles and purposes of BDSM participation. Currently, a large quantitative study is in progress to help determine the extent that BDSM fits a leisure perspective, generally, and also potential differences in BDSM as serious or casual leisure between BDSM identities, specifically. While much more research on BDSM as potential leisure is needed, it appears that a leisure framework may explain a wide range of BDSM activities. At the same time, utilizing a leisure perspective may eventually help decrease stigma that many BDSM participants, unfortunately, continue to face.

References

- Attwood, F., & Smith, C. (2013). Leisure sex: More sex! Better sex! Sex is fucking brilliant! Sex, sex, sex, sex. In T. Blackshaw (Ed.), *Routledge handbook of leisure studies* (pp. 325-336). London: Routledge.
- Charmaz, K. (2000). Grounded theory: Objectivist and constructivist methods. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 509-535). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cross, P. A., & Matheson, K. (2006). Understanding sadomasochism: An empirical examination of four perspectives. *Journal of Homosexuality, 50*(2/3), 133-166.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality, volume one*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Kleiber, D. A., Walker, G. J., & Mannell, R. C. (2011). *A social psychology of leisure*. State College, PA: Venture.
- Newmahr, S. (2011). Rethinking kink: Sadomasochism as serious leisure. *Qualitative Sociology, 33*, 313-331.
- Powls, J., & Davies, J. (2012). A descriptive review of research relating to sadomasochism: Considerations for clinical practice. *Deviant Behavior, 33*, 223-234.
- Prior, E. E. (2013). Women's perspectives of BDSM power exchange. In *Electronic Journal of Human Sexuality, volume 13*.
- Richters, J., de Visser, R. O., Rissel, C. E., Grulich, A. E., & Smith, A. M. A. (2008). Demographic and psychosocial features of participants in bondage and discipline, "sadomasochism" or dominance and submission (BDSM): Data from a national Survey. *Journal of Sexual Medicine, 5*, 1660-1668.
- Rubin, G. (1993). Thinking sex: Notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality. In H. Abelove, M. A. Barale, & D. M. Halperin (Eds.), *The lesbian and gay studies reader* (pp. 3-44). New York: Routledge.
- Sandnabba, N. K., Santilla, P., Alison, L., & Nordling, N. (2002). Demographics, sexual behavior, family background and abuse experiences of practitioners of sadomasochistic sex: A review of recent research. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy, 17*, 39-55.
- Stebbins, R. A. (1997). Casual leisure: A conceptual statement. *Leisure Studies, 16*, 17-25.
- Stebbins, R. A. (1999). Serious leisure. In E. L. Jackson & T. L. Burton (Eds.), *Leisure studies: Prospects for the Twenty-First Century*. State College, PA: Venture.
- Weinberg, T. (2006). Sadomasochism and the social sciences: A review of the sociological and social psychological literature. *Journal of Homosexuality, 50*(2/3), 17-40.
- Williams, D J (2006). Different (painful!) strokes for different folks: A general overview of sexual sadomasochism and its diversity. *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity, 13*, 333-346.
- Williams, D J (2009). Deviant leisure: Rethinking "the good, the bad, and the ugly." *Leisure Sciences, 31*, 207-213.
- Wismeijer, A. A. J., & van Assen, M. A. L. M. (2013). Psychological characteristics of BDSM practitioners. *Journal of Sexual Medicine, 10*, 1943-1952.

Responding to Academic Critiques of Sex Work: Practical Suggestions from a Sex-Positive Perspective

Jeremy N. Thomas, PhD
Idaho State University and Center for
Positive Sexuality

While the prevalence of sex workers and the size and growth of the sex industry is regularly disputed and/or misrepresented (Weitzer, 2007), by all accounts, sex work forms a significant part of the American economy. Whether prostitution, erotic massage, escorting, dancing, modeling, pornography, or providing BDSM and fetish services—sex work and sex workers are available virtually everywhere, and depending on the particular service involved, are utilized by anywhere from a small but substantial portion of the population (e.g., prostitution; Monto & McRee, 2005) to a large percentage of adults (e.g., pornography; Carroll et al., 2008; Döring, 2009).

Needless to say, many persons find this problematic. Indeed, drawing on religious rhetoric (Thomas, 2013) as well as popular notions of decency (Heins, 2007) and sentimentality (Ericsson, 1980), many Americans are quick to offer moral condemnation of these practices (Sherkat & Ellison, 1997; Weitzer, 2006). In this article, however, I want to look beyond just popular opinion, and I want to consider how academics have often responded to sex work. In particular, I am interested in why it is that although academics have frequently come to the defense of other popularly-controversial aspects of sexuality—for example, homosexuality—when it has come to sex work, academics have typically been much more hesitant to counter popular opinion.

To help make sense of this, I present three standard academic critiques of sex work that I suggest have often held academics back from taking a more sex-positive perspective. Although I only present the basic contours of these critiques, I present them with the intent of highlighting how a more sex-positive perspective could respond to these critiques in a helpful and constructive manner. That is, instead of simply dismissing or attempting to undermine these critiques, I ask, how might academics respond to these critiques in ways that could be both practically beneficial as well as broadly applicable?—not just for other academics, but also for clinicians and policy makers, as well as for those who either work in the sex industry or utilize the services that the industry provides. Accordingly, I now present three standard academic critiques of sex work, after which, I offer three corresponding responses.

Three Standard Academic Critiques of Sex Work

While academic critiques of sex work are wide-ranging and often quite sophisticated (Zatz, 1997), I suggest that in basic form there are really three standard critiques that have subsequently been adapted and integrated in a variety of ways. The first of these is the Marxist critique. This critique derives from Marx's general critique of capitalism (1976) as well as Engels' specific application of this critique to the family structure (2010). At root, this critique can be summed up in Marx's aphorism that "Prostitution is only a particular expression of the universal prostitution of the worker..." (1992, p. 350). By this, Marx meant that just as the general workings of capitalism are inherently exploitive (e.g., owners profiting from and mistreating their workers), so too, sex work is inherently exploitive (e.g., pimps and club owners profiting from and

mistreating their prostitutes and dancers). One of the interesting corollaries to this is that the Marxist tradition has frequently argued that just like workers in any other industry, the exploitation of sex workers is not constant but rather varies significantly across situations and contexts (Ericsson, 1980; Kesler, 2002). In particular, when sex work takes place in less regulated environments (e.g., child brothels in Thailand), sex workers are subject to greater levels of exploitation, while in more regulated environments (e.g., adult brothels in Nevada), such exploitation is decreased.

The second standard academic critique of sex work is the radical feminist critique. Often identified with the writings of Dworkin (1981) and MacKinnon (1989), the radical feminist critique argues that sex work is not only exploitive because owners profit from and mistreat their workers, but more critically, because owners are overwhelmingly male, and workers are overwhelmingly female. This promotes the idea that sex work is not really about selling sexual services, but actually about selling women themselves (Barry, 1979, 1995). In turn, the radical feminist critique argues that this kind of objectification leads to the further mistreatment of sex workers by both owners and buyers—which ultimately results in the similar mistreatment of women more generally (Dines, 2010). In sum, the radical feminist critique argues that sex work reinforces patriarchy and heteronormativity. Sex work, it is claimed, turns women into sexual objects to be used and mistreated by men.

The third standard academic critique of sex work is the critical theory critique. While this critique is perhaps the least likely to be specifically identified, in many ways, it is the most powerful and enduring of the three standard critiques. Based primarily on the

work of Marcuse (1955, 1964), the critical theory critique argues that when sex becomes something that is bought and sold, both the buyer and the seller lose a part of themselves in the transaction. The idea here is that in its natural form, sexuality is a creative energy that in order to be fully experienced must be freely given and freely received (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). Hence, when sex enters the marketplace, its creative energy becomes regimented and diminished through the constraints of exchange and consumption (Fleming, 2007). No matter how consensual and pleasurable the experience may be, the critical theory critique argues that the sale of sex fundamentally degrades its creative character, and in turn, both buyers and sellers become alienated from their own sexualities.

Responding Instead of Dismissing

Many advocates of the above critiques—whether Marxist, radical feminist, or critical theory—argue that sex work of all kinds should be discouraged, resisted, and made illegal or at least difficult and costly to access (e.g., Jeffreys, 2009). Alternatively, some proponents of sex work argue that these critiques are invalid and should simply be dismissed. Instead of either of these options, I suggest taking a more sex-positive perspective. That is, rather than trying to adjudicate evidence and trying to assess the validity of these critiques, I propose giving each of them the benefit of the doubt, and then asking, given that sex work and the sex industry is not likely to be going away any time soon, how we might respond to these critiques in a helpful and constructive manner? Accordingly, I now offer three responses that lay out some practical suggestions that could be promoted by academics and then implemented by clinicians and policy makers, as well as by

those who either work in the sex industry or utilize the services that the industry provides. Although these responses are not necessarily new and have in large part been articulated elsewhere (e.g., Bell, 1994; Chapkis, 1997; Rubin, 1984), nonetheless, I think it is still helpful to identify and describe some basic sex-positive responses.

First, to the degree that the Marxist critique may have some validity in arguing that sex work is an inherently exploitive labor practice, I suggest that the appropriate response lies in advocating for the kinds of occupational regulations that will reduce this exploitation. In particular, academics should not only call for the decriminalization and legalization of consensual, adult sex work, but they should also call for fair labor practices, for profit sharing, for safe workplaces, and especially for the opportunity for sex workers to be self-employed as desired. Now, obviously, much of the current regulation of sex work is not at all intended to support these goals but actually is intended to limit and discourage sex work. Hence, when it comes to implementing new regulations, it is imperative that policy makers partner with sex workers in developing these regulations, so that these regulations properly serve the interests of sex workers. To be clear, regulation must support and protect sex workers, not further exploit them.

Second, to the degree that the radical feminists critique may have some validity in arguing that sex work reinforces patriarchy and heteronormativity, I suggest that the appropriate response lies in advocating for the diversification and queerification of sex work. With regard to the gender of sex workers, academics should be especially supportive of sex workers who identify as male, trans, or otherwise genderqueer. Likewise, with regard to sexual services,

academics should be especially supportive of queer and alternative services such as those provided by gay escorts and lesbian dancers, as well as by professional dominants and submissives, by alternative pornography actors, and by fetish service providers. By means of such diversification and queerification, sex work can move away from reinforcing patriarchy and heteronormativity and actually begin to undermine these hegemonic structures.

Third, to the degree that the critical theory critique may have some validity in arguing that sex work alienates buyers and sellers from their own sexualities, I suggest that the appropriate response lies in advocating for the legitimization and celebration of sex work as a creative occupation that not only provides an important source of income for many persons but can also be personally meaningful and fulfilling. While there are many ways in which this might be understood (e.g., in a therapeutic sense, an entertainment sense, or a self-actualization sense), regardless of the particularities, academics should encourage others to see sex work as a creative enterprise, as acceptable and important as any other line of work. Alongside this academic encouragement, clinicians can also play a valuable role in supporting these kinds of ideas. Finally, sex workers, as well as those who utilize their services, can both be intentional in respecting and validating—and thus reifying—the creative dimensions of their mutual interactions.

Conclusion

In many environments, the conditions of sex work are obviously less than ideal. Indeed, claims that sex work is exploitive, patriarchal, heteronormative, and alienating are not without merit. Yet, at the same time, such claims do not accurately describe the

situations of many sex workers. Rather, as research has increasingly found (Weitzer, 2009), the conditions of sex work, as well as the personal assessments of sex workers, actually vary significantly. This suggests, then, that even if one has overarching concerns about sex work, regardless of such concerns, it should be relatively straightforward to agree to advocate for practical ways to improve the environments and conditions under which sex work takes place. However, beyond just this, a sex-positive perspective must go further and must reject the latent moralizing and fundamental uneasiness about sexuality that clearly pervades academic critiques of sex work and that undoubtedly contributes to the very problems that these critiques identify. Instead, academics—along with clinicians and policy makers, as well as those who either work in the sex industry or utilize the services that the industry provides—should together advocate not only for the decriminalization and legalization of consensual, adult sex work, but also for the legitimation and celebration of such work as both a necessary and desirable part of the human experience.

References

- Barry, K. (1979). *Female sexual slavery*. New York: New York University Press.
- Barry, K. (1995). *The prostitution of sexuality*. New York: New York University Press.
- Bell, S. (1994). *Reading, writing, and rewriting the prostitute body*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Carroll, J. S., Padilla-Walker, L. M., Nelson, L. J., Olson, C. D., Barry, C. M., & Madsen, S. D. (2008). Generation XXX: Pornography acceptance and use among emerging adults. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 23*(1), 6–30.
- Chapkis, W. (1997). *Live sex acts: Women performing erotic labor*. New York: Routledge.
- Dines, G. (2010). *Pornland: How porn has hijacked our sexuality*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Döring, N. M. (2009). The Internet's impact on sexuality: A critical review of 15 years of research. *Computers in Human Behavior, 25*(5), 1089–1101.
- Dworkin, A. (1981). *Pornography: Men possessing women*. New York: Perigee Books.
- Engels, F. (2010). *The origin of the family, private property and the state*. New York: Penguin Classics.
- Ericsson, L. O. (1980). Charges against prostitution: An attempt at a philosophical assessment. *Ethics, 90*(3), 335–366.
- Fleming, P. (2007). Sexuality, power and resistance in the workplace. *Organization Studies, 28*(2), 239–256.
- Heins, M. (2007). *Not in front of the children: 'Indecency,' censorship, and the innocence of youth* (2nd. ed.). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Horkheimer, M., & Adorno, T. W. (2002). *Dialectic of enlightenment: Philosophical fragments*. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Jeffreys, S. (2009). *The idea of prostitution* (2nd. ed.). North Melbourne, Australia: Spinifex Press.
- Kesler, K. (2002). Is a feminist stance in support of prostitution possible? An exploration of current trends. *Sexualities, 5*(2), 219–235.
- MacKinnon, C. A. (1989). *Toward a feminist theory of the state*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Marcuse, H. (1955). *Eros and civilization: A philosophical inquiry into Freud*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Marcuse, H. (1964). *One-dimensional man: Studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Marx, K. (1976). *Capital: A critique of political economy* (Vol. 1). New York: Penguin Books.
- Marx, K. (1992). Economic and philosophic manuscripts (1844) *Karl Marx: Early writings* (pp. 279–400). New York: Penguin Books.
- Monto, M. A., & McRee, N. (2005). A comparison of the male customers of female street prostitutes with national samples of men. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology, 49*(5), 505–529.
- Rubin, G. (1984). Thinking sex: Notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality. In C. S. Vance (Ed.), *Pleasure and danger: Exploring female sexuality* (pp. 267–319). Boston, MA: Routledge.

- Sherkat, D. E., & Ellison, C. G. (1997). The cognitive structure of a moral crusade: Conservative Protestantism and opposition to pornography. *Social Forces*, 75(3), 957–980.
- Thomas, J. N. (2013). Outsourcing moral authority: The internal secularization of evangelicals' anti-pornography narratives. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 52(3), 457–475.
- Weitzer, R. (2006). Moral crusade against prostitution. *Society*, 43(3), 33–38.
- Weitzer, R. (2007). The social construction of sex trafficking: Ideology and institutionalization of a moral crusade. *Politics and Society*, 35(3), 447–475.
- Weitzer, R. (2009). Sociology of sex work. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 35, 213–234.
- Zatz, N. D. (1997). Sex work/sex act: Law, labor, and desire in constructions of prostitution. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 22(2), 277–308.

Submission Guidelines

We invite original submissions from diverse epistemological and methodological approaches on any topic that explicitly pertains to positive sexuality. A full range of qualitative and quantitative methods are acceptable. We also encourage nonacademic professionals and graduate students to submit original work. Please follow these guidelines as you prepare your work for submission:

- All manuscripts should be written in American Psychological Association (APA) 6th edition format and should be up to eight double-spaced pages, including references.
- Given the diverse readership of the journal, authors should try to avoid using highly technical jargon whenever possible. As best as possible, strive for a manuscript that can easily be understood by scholars and professionals outside of your field.
- For traditional research manuscripts, authors should provide a short summary of the current literature, briefly explain the methods used, and clearly report findings and implications.
- Theoretical, conceptual, and creative analytic (narrative, poetic representation, etc.) submissions also should reflect appropriate scholarly criteria and aesthetic presentation. Case reports and creative essays may also be submitted for review.
- Manuscripts should be submitted as an email attachment (Microsoft Word) to the co-editors at submissions@journalofpositivesexuality.org.

More Information:

Manuscripts will be screened initially by the editors and anonymized before being reviewed by at least two experts. The editors will make publication decisions based on recommendations from the reviewers.

Publication decisions normally will occur within six weeks of manuscript submission.

Revisions and Publication:

Authors may receive a reply that asks for revisions before possible publication. Authors are encouraged to revise their work as noted by the editors and resubmit for publication.

The editors will not revise content nor alter layout (other than necessary for transfer from Word document settings to PDF and web-based layout) of submitted work without the author's permission.

As best as possible, the editors will provide a sample of the final manuscript to the author before publication occurs.

The editors reserve the right to alter grammatical errors if required for publication without the author's permission.

Contact Us:

To submit work for review or inquire about submitted work, please email: submissions@journalofpositivesexuality.org.

For all other questions, comments, or concerns, please email: info@journalofpositivesexuality.org.