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Insights on Conscientious Peacemaking as a Dimension of Positive Sexuality

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Abstract

Peacemaking is included as one of eight interrelated dimensions of positive sexuality, yet it is perhaps the least familiar aspect of positive sexuality to both professionals and lay people within modern Western society. Although a peacemaking process has been practiced by indigenous cultures for centuries, the contemporary U.S. political climate is now to a point, unfortunately, when ubiquitous war-making to address social issues is normalized and commonly assumed to be the only process for resolving such issues. In this article, we summarize key features of a peacemaking approach and suggest how peacemaking is related to, but also distinct from, other dimensions of positive sexuality. We emphasize the need to apply attributes of conscientious peacemaking to a range of contemporary sociosexual problems and issues, while addressing identity politics, sex education, and sexual crime, as specific examples.

Introduction

A network of scholars recently identified and summarized eight key dimensions in developing a framework of positive sexuality, which can be applied to better understanding and effectively addressing a range of sociosexual issues and problems (Williams, Thomas, Prior, & Walters, 2015; Williams, Christensen, Capous-Desyllas, 2016; Williams, Prior, & Vincent, in press). According to these scholars, the interrelated dimensions of positive sexuality are: (a) “positive” refers to strengths, wellbeing, and happiness; (b) individual sexuality is unique and multifaceted; (c) positive sexuality embraces multiple ways of knowing; (d) positive sexuality reflects professional ethics; (e) positive sexuality promotes open and honest communication; (f) positive sexuality is humanizing; (g) positive sexuality applies across all levels of social structure; and (h) positive sexuality encourages peacemaking. Of these dimensions, peacemaking seems to be the least familiar in modern Western society and quite possibly also the most difficult to implement.

In this article, we suggest that peacemaking is sorely needed given the ongoing “sex wars” of the past several decades, which are rooted in both longstanding sex negativity and a ubiquitous modern culture that addresses critical social issues from a stance, consciously or unconsciously, of war—where one party (or more) is victorious, while another party (or more) is

defeated. Specifically, we intend to provide insights into how attributes of peacemaking may be applied to matters of sexuality, thus potentially promoting a move toward eventually resolving controversial sociosexual issues wherein progress, regarding fairness and social justice, has been slow. While our intent here is to provide valuable insights in applying basic peacemaking to sexuality issues, readers are referred elsewhere for comprehensive theoretical and ideological discussions of peacemaking in both preventing and addressing harms (e.g., Hanh, 2005, 2014; Ishoy & Kruijs, 2019; Pepinsky, 2013; Pepinsky & Quinney, 1991; Quinney, 2000).

Attributes and Process of Peacemaking

Peacemaking has been a core feature of indigenous cultures for centuries. Peacemaking requires self-awareness and self-management, careful listening, empathy, creativity, continual learning, and the ability to let go of what is not within one's control (Hanh, 2005, 2014). Peacemaking is achieved through the collective goal for all to heal and move on; thus, it is essential that all voices are valued and empowered. While violence is a common reaction to fear, threats, and emotional pain, peacemaking requires an underlying focus on self-control, compassion, and the ability to listen to, and understand, many different perspectives (Pepinsky, 2013). Peacemaking can also be associated with valuing harmony over retributive justice and privileging the collective over the individual. It may be difficult for many to consider implementing peacemaking when subtle violence is often ubiquitous within much of modern western culture.

A central tenet of peacemaking is the realization that violence cannot be solved with violence (Quinney, 2000). Accordingly, modern Western war-making approaches to social issues that are commonly reflected in popular slogans, such as “the war on drugs,” “the fight for LGBTQ rights,” and “combatting sexual violence” may be well-intentioned but have limited effect in successfully resolving such issues. As the (perhaps apocryphal) tale goes, Mother Teresa declined to attend a march against war, but said she would gladly attend a march for peace. Sadly, a tough, war-making approach, where winning is sought with little critical thought as to potential monetary and emotional costs, seems to drive current political agendas and social policy development. In addition, war-making processes lead to further division and animosity through identity politics and thus may be counterproductive in resolving many sociosexual issues. When an adversarial approach is taken, it facilitates resistance and conflict. A purely positive approach fosters collaboration and expansion.

According to Fuller (1998), a peacemaking perspective requires: nonviolence and peaceful means in approaching social problems and issues; social justice at all levels (micro, mezzo, and macro); inclusion of all parties involved; ensuring that all parties fully understand the language of the issue and ways that it may be addressed; and Kant's categorical imperative (People should not act in a way that they would not want everyone else to act). These attributes of peacemaking, then, clearly overlap with the roots of other positive sexuality dimensions—specifically those of: humanization, open and honest communication, professional ethics, application at all levels of social structure, and multiple ways of knowing.

The dimension of peacemaking, in contrast to many of the other dimensions of positive sexuality, seems to be ideological, which then drives a process of creative problem-solving. In

other words, peacemaking calls for a particular way of being and is ontological, which then naturally facilitates a peaceful process of doing. This makes it a unique and particularly valuable, though sometimes difficult, approach to dealing with sexual matters, especially given a long Western history of sex-negativity and the natural sex-negative consequence of applying a war-making approach to sexual matters. Thus, it may be argued that positive sexuality cannot truly be positive without a creative process of peacemaking, because the “positive” in positive sexuality refers to the presence of strengths and beneficial attributes that overall increase well-being and quality of life. Because peacemaking seeks to make things better in the long term for everyone involved (win-win), rather than outcomes where some benefit and others do not (win-lose), a peacemaking process reflects collective positivity. Furthermore, peacemaking and humanization are complementary as an ideological way of being. Because peacemaking focuses on the process of how all parties can contribute to seek ways where healing and success for all may be realized, the centrality of a collective process, especially within a pervasive sex-negative culture, emphasizes its importance as a unique positive sexuality dimension. Thus, a peacemaking application potentially can be beneficial to sex research, education, professional practice, and collectively addressing sociosexual issues. Implicit in this process may be a relaxing of individual identities such that there is greater focus on collaboratively “getting it right” with less concern about “being right” and winning or demonstrating superiority. While at times peacemaking may call for defending truths and human rights, such a stance does not include provoking or attacking language or behavior.

Toward the Application of Peacemaking to Sex Topics: Some Examples

In the remainder of this article, we offer insights on the potential benefits of applying peacemaking to a few salient contemporary sexual issues, specifically sexual identity politics, sex education, and sexual crime and violence.

Sexual Identity Politics

In recent decades, there have been tensions, understandably, between political gay rights activists that have used the “born this way” theory to defend gay rights (Stomblor, Baunach, Simonds, Windsor, & Burgess, 2014) and those who reject this approach. The “queer by choice” argument opposes the “born this way” theory and advocates for equality as humans, yet defends sexuality as a choice (Wilkerson, 2009). These longstanding sexual identity politics and associated conflicts are largely rooted in fear, and thus could benefit from the cultivation of the peacemaking process, where people on both sides are heard and valued, and underlying fears are recognized. The amelioration of such conflicts can include broadening from binary views. When an issue is framed in black-and-white terms, there is greater likelihood of discord. When perspectives are complexified, and nuances and/or continua are acknowledged, greater harmony can arise. We point out, accordingly, that newer theories, such as *Sexual Configurations Theory* (SCT) (van Anders, 2015) recognize that sexual identities are extremely diverse and complex and are shaped by numerous factors, with some being outside of individuals’ control (e.g., genetics), while others are more malleable and within individuals’ control. Thus, compared to earlier theories, SCT seems conducive to implementing conscientious peacemaking. Earlier debates and opposing points of view, though limited, have contributed to current, more sophisticated and nuanced research and theory. However, it remains important to incorporate

multiple disciplines, theories, and methods in advancing sexuality knowledge, and especially to move beyond fear as a primary driver of policy.

In recent decades, there has been a rapid explosion regarding the numerous ways that individuals self-identify regarding gender and sexuality. It seems that some, perhaps more conservative, people may be dismissive, to one degree or another, of these emerging sex and gender terms and identifiers. There are others, however, who may be easily offended if their preferred specific identity term is not precisely used or correctly understood by other people. Peacemaking seeks to understand others, appreciates people's good intentions, and encourages openness, continued learning, and forgiveness. Valuing and practicing a peacemaking process leads to greater understanding and appreciation of the complexity of individuals' sexual identities (recognition that individual sexuality is multifaceted and unique, a specific dimension of positive sexuality). Recognizing that enormous fear and vulnerability are often connected to both individuals' sexual identities and beliefs, irrespective of particular stances, may help to foster greater compassion and facilitate peacemaking in this domain.

The United States can benefit from adopting a peacemaking approach to create policies that protect people of all genders and sexualities. For example, multi-gender policies have been implemented in the European Union for over 25 years (Wade & Ferree, 2018). Furthermore, peacemaking operations for refugees have been employed by the United Nations in policies that are inclusive to different genders (Schmidt, Mittelman, Cheru, & Tripp, 2009). Despite these global advances, the United States currently seems to be under a largely binary political climate where people are afraid to communicate in community spaces for fear of being ostracized or punished in some way, which reflects a common, modern, war-making process. In other words, peacemaking is not about being more or less conservative or liberal but is about trying to understand and appreciate others as unique individuals, being open to continual learning, valuing people's good intentions, practicing integrity, and being willing to forgive.

Sex Education

It is significant to note that sex education is historically rooted in the old notion that biological sex equates gender (Strombler et al., 2014). This notion is counter to modern day gender equality activism and further intensifies tensions in gender identity politics. Sex education fails to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of the fluidity of gender identity and the complexity of sexual identity. Sex education has continued to perpetuate stereotypical, socially constructed, binary gender norms and sexual scripts. School administrators, educators, and gender equality activists would all benefit from taking a peacemaking approach in updating sex education in schools to be inclusive of all genders and sexualities. It is crucial that children receive early sex education that addresses a range of genders and sexualities.

Desirable sex education should discuss potential risks, but also benefits, of sexual behavior. For example, masturbation triggers the neurotransmitter dopamine and releases feel-good hormones that can help reduce feelings of anxiety and depression. Sexual activities are, of course, pleasurable, and experiencing pleasure is an important, healthy aspect of human existence. This obvious reality should be addressed in sex education curricula. More broadly,

sexual health, including pleasure, is an important component of one's overall wellbeing (World Health Organization, 2006), and should be routinely discussed in sex education programs to improve overall effectiveness (Koepsel, 2016).

Sex education should empower students and help them learn to make well-informed sexual decisions that are consistent with other important aspects of their identities. Contemporary sex education programs, focused on risk and largely driven by a constellation of parents' fears, are presented didactically to youth, who are commonly assumed to lack the capacity for making responsible sexual choices (Elliott, 2012). Thus, peacemaking could directly help improve sex education in at least two ways: (a) welcoming and addressing discussions concerning parents' fears; and (b) welcoming and encouraging active youth participation in sex education. By doing so, all voices are part of the conversation; fears are addressed; and youth should be better informed, empowered, and given responsibility to make good sexual choices for themselves.

Diverse Sexual Interests and Practices

There is tremendous variation regarding humans' sexual interests, activities, and preferred frequencies. Bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadomasochism (BDSM) is a broad, umbrella term used to describe a wide range of potential erotic, consensual behaviors that may involve one or more elements of fetish interests, pain, humiliation, physical restriction, discipline, dominance, and submission. BDSM motivations and practices are complex and seem to vary between individuals (Spratt & Williams, 2019). Additionally, BDSM experience is shaped by one's culture, social positioning, and specific identity attributes, including gender (Simula, 2019; Simula & Sumerau, 2018). Many individuals who engage in diverse erotic behaviors are psychologically well-adjusted individuals and may be members of alternative sexuality communities (Carlström, 2018). A recent review of the literature found that BDSM may function as legitimate leisure experience—typically associated with a sense of freedom, sense of adventure, decreased stress, and positive emotions—for large numbers of participants, while also being a particular sexual identity for some (Spratt & Williams, 2019).

As with other sexual topics in a cultural climate of sex-negativity, widespread historical interpretations of BDSM have been cloaked in fear and rooted in assumptions of psychopathology. Such assumptions have been thoroughly discredited by a rapidly growing number of studies over the past few decades (for reviews, see Kleinplatz & Moser, 2006; Powlis & Davies, 2012; Simula, 2019).

While BDSM participants represent a wide variety of erotic interests and practices, there is also scholarship on many other diverse, closeted, sexual identities and preferences that often challenges common assumptions, including asexuality (Sloan, 2015; Yule, Brotto, & Gorzalka, 2017), casual sex enthusiasts (Armstrong, 2012; Ghaziani, 2017; Wade, 2017), swingers (Edgar, 2017; Kimberly, Hans, & Hans, 2017; Platteau, van Lankveld, Ooms, & Florence, 2017), and many more. In evaluating the acceptability of sexual practices, whatever these may entail, priorities among participants should include consent, thorough communication, an ethic of care, and caution (Williams, Thomas, Prior, & Christensen, 2014).

Similar to sexual identity politics and sex education, a peacemaking approach to understanding diverse sexual interests and practices must address peoples' various fears. The peacemaking process should include trying to understand subjective experience, compassion for all, and a desire for people to listen and learn from each other (Pepinsky, 2013). The peacemaking process, then, is consistent with core principles of professional ethics, such as client self-determination, compassion, social justice, cultural competence, and embracing human diversity.

Sexual Crime and Violence

No sexuality topic reflects the widespread acceptance of a war-making process more than contemporary sexual violence policy. It has been documented that the failed U.S. “war on drugs” has moved to a “war on sex offenders” (Oliver, 2012; Rayburn-Yung, 2009). The war on sex offenders relies on the fallacy of emotional reasoning and widespread propagation of myths, thus creating a moral panic. Myths concerning sex offenders—that sex offenders and their motives are all the same, that they nearly always re-offend, and that sex offender treatment is ineffective (Quinn, Forsyth, & Mullen-Quinn, 2004) —are so pervasive that many policymakers, law enforcement personnel, and helping professionals believe them (Meloy, Boatwright, & Curtis, 2013). Reviews of the sex offender research literature show that sex offenders are a heterogeneous group, sexual re-offense rate is generally low for many offenders, and that evidence-based treatment is effective in reducing recidivism (e.g., Hanson, Bourgon, & Helmus, 2009; Walton & Chou, 2014; Williams, Thomas, & Prior, 2015).

Despite assumptions that current U.S. sex offender policy is effective, a thorough review of the research literature suggests that such policy is ineffective at best, encourages violence toward offenders and also their families, and thus may increase recidivism risk (Williams, Thomas, & Prior, 2015). Recent research has shown that sex offender policies have damaging long term effects on housing mobility, increase the likelihood of moving into more socially disorganized neighborhoods with crime, and affect racial minority sex offenders the most (Tewksbury et al., 2016). There is a long historical record showing a range of responses from neglect to rejection to violence toward many groups who have not been well understood. As fear increases, curiosity declines, and in leaping to conclusions about individuals and groups, peace is diminished. Again, through acknowledgment of complexity, and some hesitation before basking in uninformed conclusions, greater understanding and compassion can develop.

Minority communities, specifically the Black and Latino communities, face harsher sentencing compared to white offenders (Curry, 2017). For example, Brock Turner, a White college student attending Stanford University, was seen by two eyewitnesses raping an unconscious woman and was sentenced to six months in prison. However, Albert Wilson, a Black college student attending Kansas University, was recently sentenced to twelve years in prison for allegedly raping a White woman, yet the prosecutors had zero DNA evidence and no eyewitnesses. The most violent sexual offenses receive high media coverage and fuel sex offending myths, and racial sentencing discrepancies exacerbate tensions in communities. As a peacemaking reminder, violence cannot be resolved through violence (Quinney, 2000). A peacemaking approach utilizes restorative justice and is likely to be much more just and beneficial to all—where all voices (including voices of victims, offenders, and their families) are

valued and heard; creative solutions to make things right, as best as possible, are sought in a spirit of compassion, understanding, and offender accountability.

Conclusion

Peacemaking is a distinct dimension of positive sexuality that overlaps considerably with other dimensions, including humanization, open and honest communication, professional ethics, application at all levels of social structure, and multiple ways of knowing. Peacemaking includes a conscientious way of being and a solution-focused process. It requires understanding and addressing one's own personal fears and insecurities, recognizing that others have their own fears and insecurities (which tend to play out unconsciously in war-making tactics), valuing people despite their faults and limitations, appreciating good intentions, encouraging continual learning, and being willing to forgive. Peacemaking brings together many voices to hold people accountable and to find creative solutions to problems. In a sex-negative cultural climate where sexual knowledge has long been cloaked in fear, and sex wars continue to drag on, shifting to a peacemaking stance can be difficult, indeed. The arduousness of this process may be exacerbated by the current cultural and media climate in which misogyny and violence are frequent and often normalized by figures in powerful roles. Nevertheless, peacemaking and positive sexuality, more generally, offer hope in eventually resolving sociosexual issues and improving quality of life for greater numbers of people.

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Reactions to Homosexual, Transgender, and Heterosexual Public Displays of Affection

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Abstract

At least two factors may influence reactions to public displays of affection (PDA): personal level of comfort with PDA and attitudes toward sexual minorities. In three studies, we measured participants' reactions to videotaped heterosexual, homosexual, and transgender PDA. A measure was created to evaluate comfort with PDA. Across all studies, we found that comfort with PDA predicted participant reactions toward PDA. We also found that participants were generally comfortable with viewing all PDA scenarios, but participants were most comfortable viewing heterosexual PDA and least comfortable viewing transgender PDA. Finally, we found that multiple measures of homophobic attitudes predicted reactions to PDA featuring sexual minorities.

Introduction

Support of the legal rights of homosexual couples has been on the rise in North American countries, particularly in Canada and the United States (Doan, Loehr, & Miller, 2015; Morrison, Trinder, & Morrison, 2018). In Canada, gay and lesbian couples cannot be denied the right to adopt a child due to their sexual orientation (Morrison et al., 2018). Partner rights and benefits, such as same-sex marriage, have become legal in the United States, and the majority of U.S. citizens are in favor of gay marriage (60% as of 2015; Doan et al., 2015).

Despite widespread support for the legal rights of homosexual couples, it has been found that many heterosexual individuals do not approve of homosexuals' "informal rights" (Doan et al., 2015). Engaging in a public display of affection (PDA) is an act that can be categorized under one's informal rights, meaning acceptance of PDA is an aspect of society that is not controlled through legal means, but rather through social interactions (although it is worth noting that in some countries legal regulations determine the norms surrounding PDA). Homosexual couples are at a higher risk of experiencing prejudice, negative public perception, or fear for one's personal safety when engaging in PDA compared to heterosexual couples (Doan et al., 2015; Vaquera & Kao, 2005). The present study is an examination of how attitudes toward PDA

and attitudes toward individuals of differing sexual orientations influence reactions to viewing PDA.

PDA, using physical affection, such as kissing or hugging, are methods employed in a public space to confirm and maintain relationships (e.g., Doan et al., 2015; Kent & El-Alayli, 2011). Physical affection has been defined as, “any touch intended to arouse feelings of love in the giver and/or the recipient” (Kent & El-Alavli, 2011, p. 150). Seven types of physical affection have been identified, including: “backrubs and massages, caressing and stroking, cuddling and holding, holding hands, hugging, kissing on the lips, and kissing on the face (not lips)” (Kent & El-Alavli, 2011, p. 150). Public displays of affection are considered to be important traits of a satisfying relationship, which is why it is important to consider how homosexual and transgender PDA is perceived by and affected by others (Mohr, Selterman, & Fassinger, 2013).

Public spaces are defined by the rules people follow in the space. If the normal routine of the space is to display affection, people will more readily accept PDA from any gender in that area (Hubbard, 2001). Although societies are not monolithic, a general culture can drastically change what is considered publicly acceptable. People feel more comfortable expressing PDA in countries where friendships and displays of thanks are expressed through PDA, such as in the United Kingdom, while other countries have more conservative attitudes (Anderson, Adams, & Rivers, 2010; Soysal, 2010).

Kisses are common in the public sphere within the United States, which is regarded to be in the middle range of acceptability of public displays of affection (Fox, 1999). Within the United States, attitudes toward the acceptability of PDA vary greatly. Many individuals in the United States condone heterosexual couples holding hands or kissing but discourage making out or sexually touching. In contrast, there are some people who believe all public displays of affection are inappropriate. Anecdotes often emerge demonstrating how small public displays of affection can garner negative reactions. For example, in 2007, a female middle school student in Illinois was given two days of detention for hugging a female friend (Gray, 2007).

Heterosexual couples often engage in small public acts of love in everyday life, but it is less common to see homosexual couples showcase affection through PDA (Hubbard, 2001; Mohr et al., 2013). Homosexual couples have reported that they wish to engage in displays of affection more often, but the couples feel judged when displaying their affection (Lemar & Kite, 1998). In gay couples specifically, relationships that include showing affection are reported to be significantly more satisfying and likely to last compared to gay couples in relationships who do not showcase their affection (Lemar & Kite, 1998).

A prevalent misbelief in the United States is that negative views of homosexuality are tied to age, with the younger generations holding more accepting views than older groups. Olson and DeSouza (2017) found that religiosity and identifying as a political conservative remain the strongest influence on feelings toward sexual minorities, as opposed to age. Many religions condemn same-sex pairings, which influences the attitudes of a religion’s followers (Hubbard, 2001). In highly religious countries, attitudes toward same-sex pairings are negative, and laws

are often enacted that force homosexuals to hide their relationships from the authorities or face persecution and legal consequences (Same-Sex Marriage Laws, 2013).

For example, Islam is the federal religion of Malaysia, and homosexuality is outlawed there as a result of the laws of the religion. Homosexuality is considered to be both sinful and punishable by 20 years of imprisonment and caning (Ng, Yee, Subramaniam, Loh & Moreira, 2015). In March 2019, the country of Brunei enacted a penal code based on Shariah law, which includes death by stoning for sex between men and 40 lashes for lesbian sex (Magra, 2019). This act has been met with heavy resistance from other countries and human rights groups.

Previous studies have attempted to determine how perceptions of homosexual PDA are influenced by the viewer's attitudes toward homosexuality (Kiebel, McFadden, & Herbstrith, 2017; O'Handley, Blair & Hoskin, 2017). Kiebel et al. (2017) asked 45 female and 39 male college students in the United States to view images of gay men kissing, lesbians kissing, or heterosexual couples kissing. Test participants in this study reported little to no prejudice towards homosexuality. However, they found that individuals experienced negative valence and disgust when viewing images of gay men kissing. Images of two females kissing were rated less severely but still elicited feelings of disgust. These subjects found the images of heterosexual couples kissing to be pleasant. O'Handley et al., (2017) examined physiological reactions, implicit (AMP) ratings, and the explicit valence and disgustingness ratings of 465 heterosexual men ages 18 to 45 to images of same-sex or mixed-sex couples kissing or engaged in PDA. They found higher measures of distress (e.g., higher implicit and explicit ratings) when participants viewed men kissing than when they viewed imagery regarded to be universally disgusting (O'Handley et al., 2017). However, these studies found that individuals did not report harboring homosexual attitudes. These studies did not elucidate if these reactions indicated implicit homophobia.

At least two possible factors may guide how people react to PDA of various sexual orientations: (a) people's general attitudes and feelings toward PDA; and (b) people's attitudes toward homosexuality and transsexuality (when the couple engaged in PDA is either gay, lesbian, or transgender).

Previous studies have consistently found that men are more explicitly sexually prejudiced than women (Kiebel et al., 2017; Monto & Supinski, 2014). Viewing gay erotica is associated with negative affect, anger-hostility, and feelings of fear in men who have self-reported being sexually prejudiced (Bernat, Calhoun, Adams, & Zeichner, 2001; Parrott, Zeichner, Hoover 2006). Multiple studies have found that even when participants are considered to be non-sexually prejudiced, baseline anger-hostility increases after viewing homosexual erotic videos (Bernat et al., 2001; Hudepohl, Parrott, & Zeichner, 2010). In a study by Bishop (2015), men who viewed romantic and homoerotic images experienced increased negative emotional states. This does not mean that heterosexual women do not harbor prejudice toward homosexuality; women have also been found to experience heightened anger toward viewing same-sex relationships in videos if they self-report being high in gender traditionalism (Parrott & Gallagher, 2008). Men tend to be more discriminatory toward gay men than lesbians, while women are more discriminatory toward lesbians (Kiebel et al., 2017).

Increases in support for the rights of the homosexual community have resulted in homosexual couples expressing PDA (including on television and other forms of media) more openly than they might have in the past (O’Handley et al., 2017). However, sexuality and gender have significant effects on how public displays of affection are received by others (Anderson et al., 2010; Kent & El-Alayli, 2011). Individuals who harbor implicit and explicit feelings of homophobia now encounter more acts of PDA from homosexual couples, which might explain an increasing trend of violence toward homosexual people (O’Handley et al., 2017). As such, it seems logical that a potential influence on one’s attitudes toward PDA is one’s attitude toward gays and lesbians more generally (when the couple engaged in PDA is either gay or lesbian).

Research surrounding attitudes toward sexual minorities has focused more on issues surrounding gay and lesbian individuals than on people who identify as transgender. With higher visibility in the media and public debates on the rights of transgender individuals, conversations have recently been brought to the mainstream related to the inequality and risk of violence transgender people face in society (Mao, Hauptert & Smith, 2018). Generally speaking, transgender is an umbrella term to describe individuals who have a disconnect between their biological sex and their gender identity (Meier & Labuski, 2013).

Transgender individuals face stronger negativity and prejudiced attitudes than other sexual minorities (i.e., gay, lesbian, and bisexual people; Norton & Herek, 2018). Negative attitudes toward transgender people have been found to be a function of religious fundamentalism, political conservatism, and authoritarianism in the United States, which is consistent with attitudes toward gay and lesbian people (Norton & Herek, 2018). To date, no studies have appeared to explore attitudes toward PDA involving transgender individuals.

Study Goals and Hypotheses

This study explores attitudes toward PDA in heterosexual and sexual minority couples. Despite evidence suggesting that there are individual differences in how open to seeing PDA people are, no individual difference measures exist for assessing attitudes toward PDA. As such, one of the first goals of this research was to develop a measure of attitudes towards PDA. We hypothesized that (a) participants who were more open to PDA, would be more tolerant of this behavior in general (across all PDA types).

We were also interested if people’s reactions to PDA would vary based on the apparent sexual orientation of the targets. As such, participants reacted to heterosexual, gay male, lesbian, and (in study three) transgendered PDA. Beyond this, we were also interested if the participants’ sex, the attitudes toward PDA measure, and measures related to homophobia would interact with the witnessed PDA. In this regard, we had a number of specific hypotheses. We hypothesized that (b) there would be differences in comfort with the various forms of PDA (where heterosexual PDA would be seen as the most acceptable followed by the other forms of PDA). We also hypothesized that (c) the participants’ sex would interact with the types of PDA observed (where males would be more accepting of lesbian PDA than gay PDA, whereas females would be more accepting of gay PDA than lesbian PDA). Finally, we hypothesized that (d) people higher in various forms of homophobia would be less accepting of PDA in the relevant categories (as detailed in the individual studies).

Study One

The purpose of study one was to create an individual difference measure dealing with how comfortable a participant was with PDA. We also explored whether the participant's sex would impact participant's comfort in viewing PDA in heterosexual and homosexual couples. Finally, we sought to explore whether homophobia would interact with people's reactions to the observed PDA.

Methods

Participants. Fifty-nine students from a large private university in the Northeastern region of the United States were recruited to participate in this experiment (28 men, 31 women, $M_{age} = 19.6$ years, $SD = 1.6$). The sample was largely heterosexual ($N = 56$).

Materials: Stimuli videos. We created three ten-second videos showing public displays of affection (specifically, a couple kissing passionately). The first video featured a heterosexual couple, the second video featured a gay couple, and the third video featured a lesbian couple. Each couple consisted of Caucasian individuals. Each video showed the couple from the side, allowing both faces to be seen. The couples were balanced as much as possible for attractiveness where each member of the couple was rated as moderately attractive in a pretest. The couples were asked to kiss naturally for the length of the video.¹

Materials: Comfort with PDA measure. We also created a measure of comfortability with public displays of affection. This measure consisted of four items (e.g., (a) How comfortable are you with hand holding in public for same sex couples? (b) How comfortable are you with hand holding in public for opposite sex couples? (c) How comfortable are you with kissing in public for same sex couples? (d) How comfortable are you with kissing in public for opposite sex couples?). These items were rated on a five-point Likert-style scale (very comfortable, comfortable, neutral, uncomfortable, very uncomfortable).

Procedure. After completing a consent form upon arriving in the laboratory, participants initially self-reported basic demographic information (age, gender, sexual orientation). Then, participants watched the three stimuli videos and responded to two questions assessing if they had seen a couple of that type kissing in that type of location (a campus public space) and if they believed the subjects in the videos had a right to kiss in that area (a campus public space). The order of presentation of the videos was counterbalanced (using a Latin-Squares design). Finally, participants were asked to self-report their levels of homophobia using the Wright homophobia scale (Wright, Adams, & Bernat, 1999). As the participants were viewing the videos, the experimenter recorded outward displays of discomfort as a supplemental measure of discomfort using a rubric noting each occurrence observed (e.g., shifting in seat, looking away from the screen, obvious changes in expression, and trying to skip past the videos). The researcher could not see what was displayed on the screen, he or she simply heard an audio marker depicting the

¹ One might ask why the videos only featured Caucasian actors. This was done to limit potential experimental noise driven by people's racial attitudes as well as differential attractiveness ratings based on target race (e.g., Lewis, 2011).

start of each video and recorded the displays of discomfort (which were then linked to condition after the experimental session).

Results

Before analyzing the results, we first investigated the reliability and factor structure of the comfortability with PDA scale. The scale had a strong reliability for a 4-item scale ($\alpha = .768$), along with a one factor solution as suggested by an EFA using the Skree test and Eigenvalue tests (Eigenvalue = 2.38). As such, we combined the four items into one measure.

Self-reported comfort. Prior to conducting detailed analyses of the individual videos, we tested for order effects of the order of presentation of the videos. Order of presentation did not interact with any of the predictors (p 's > .15) and, as such, we collapsed across orders of presentation for all subsequent analyses. Given our ability to look at all participants' reactions to each video, we will present our results focused on each video in this section.

Opposite-sex pairing. In the opposite sex pairing, we entered attitudes toward PDA, homophobia, and gender into a regression equation. Attitudes toward PDA significantly predicted participants' comfort level with the scene ($b = .135$; $SEb = .049$; $p < .01$), where participants who had more supportive attitudes toward PDA were more comfortable with the scene. Neither homophobia nor gender predicted any relationships.

Gay pairing. In the gay pairing, we entered attitudes toward PDA, homophobia, and gender into a regression equation. Attitudes toward PDA significantly predicted participants' comfort level with the scene ($b = .183$; $SEb = .041$; $p < .001$), where participants who had more supportive attitudes toward PDA were more comfortable with the scene. Additionally, homophobia significantly predicted participants' level of comfort with the scene ($b = .054$; $SEb = .014$; $p < .01$), where participants who had higher levels of homophobia were less comfortable with the scene. Participant gender did not predict any relationships.

Lesbian pairing. In the lesbian pairing, we entered attitudes toward PDA, homophobia, and gender into a regression equation. Attitudes toward PDA significantly predicted participants' comfort level with the scene ($b = .152$, $SEb = .049$, $p < .01$), where participants who had more supportive attitudes toward PDA were more comfortable with the scene. Additionally, homophobia significantly predicted participants' level of comfort with the scene, ($b = .044$, $SEb = .016$, $p < .01$), where participants who had higher levels of homophobia were less comfortable with the scene. Participant gender did not predict any relationships.

Researcher observations. There was a significant difference in researcher-based observations of discomfort between the different scenes ($F(2, 110) = 7.62$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .217$). Participants displayed the most signs of discomfort in response to the gay scene ($M = 2.90$, $SD = .96$); the lesbian scene had the second most discomfort ($M = 2.66$, $SD = .99$); whereas the straight scene had the lowest level of discomfort ($M = 2.47$, $SD = .92$).

Gender of the participant also interacted with the type of scene, such that men experienced the greatest level of discomfort in response to the gay scene, whereas women had

similar levels of discomfort in response to both the lesbian and gay scenes, ($F(2, 110) = 5.64, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .172$).

Discussion

Overall comfort levels when viewing PDA were neutral to high. Women reacted less strongly than men to viewing PDA, which was clear through observed comfort levels while watching the videos. Men displayed the least amount of comfort when viewing gay PDA, whereas women reacted with less comfort toward gay and lesbian PDA. Homophobia predicted participants' level of comfort with the lesbian and gay PDA scenarios, with the lowest comfort levels in more homophobic individuals. Finally, comfortability with public displays of affection had an effect on participant response to the stimuli in all cases, confirming our hypothesis that people who are averse to public displays will react more negatively to PDA. We believe these results demonstrate that people's attitudes toward PDA are influenced by the participants' gender, the gender and sexuality of the people engaged in PDA, and the participants' general attitudes toward PDA.

Study Two

Several confounding variables could have affected the results of the first study. Although we tested for order effects (and found none), it is possible that participants ascertained the purpose of the study after viewing the first stimulus video. It is also possible that the presence of the researcher evaluating participant responses changed participants' responses (Henry et al., 2015). As such, we conducted an online follow-up study where we only administered one video per participant to control for these potential influences. We also collected additional individual difference measures to allow for a test of discriminant validity of our attitudes towards PDA measure.

Methods

Participants. One hundred fifty-four students participated in this experiment (92 men, 62 women, $M_{age} = 19.6$ years, $SD = 2.4$). The sample was largely heterosexual ($N = 126$), with lower numbers of bisexuals ($n = 10$), homosexuals ($n = 6$), unsure/questioning ($n = 10$), and other ($n = 2$).

Procedure. After documenting consent, participants watched one of the PDA videos from study one (the specific video was randomly assigned to each participant) and rated their level of comfort with the video. Next, participants completed a self-monitoring scale (Snyder, 1974), the comfort with PDA measure from study one, demographics, a homophobia measure (Altemeyer, 2002), a religiosity measure (Worthington et al, 2012), and the Wright homophobia scale (Wright et al., 1999).

Results

Preliminary analysis. Before analyzing the results, we again investigated the reliability and factor structure of the comfortability with PDA scale. The scale had a strong reliability

($\alpha = .833$), along with a one factor solution as suggested by an EFA using the Skree and Eigenvalue tests (Eigenvalue = 2.67). As in study one, these results highly suggest a single factor solution and, as such, we combined the items into a single score.

Primary analysis. Given that each participant only saw one video (unlike study one), we will present our results for this study collapsing across all videos. Our first question of interest was whether attitudes toward PDA would influence participants' responses to the video. As in study one, attitudes toward PDA significantly predicted participants' comfort level with the scene ($b = .147$, $SEb = .025$, $p < .001$), where participants who had more supportive attitudes toward PDA were more comfortable with the scene.

Next, we investigated whether there was a difference in how the three videos were perceived. We found that heterosexual displays were seen as most comfortable ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.08$); lesbian ($M = 2.75$, $SD = .94$) and gay ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.26$) had lower levels of comfort ($F(2,151) = 9.94$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .116$).

Next, we analyzed whether the measures of homophobia interacted with the gender of the persons engaged in PDA. We found converging results between both measures of homophobia, such that there were significant differences between participants who were high in homophobia and low in homophobia in how comfortable they felt with the gay male pairing, such that homophobic participants were less comfortable with that display of affection (Altemeyer measure: $F(2, 139) = 4.73$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .063$; Wright measure: $F(2, 139) = 4.18$, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .057$). Neither measure significantly predicted attitudes towards the lesbian pairing (p 's $> .15$).

We then analyzed whether religiosity influenced participants' responses. We found a trend toward significance where highly religious participants were less comfortable with gay male PDA ($F(2, 139) = 2.27$, $p = .11$, partial $\eta^2 = .031$), although we urge caution in over interpreting this data as it has not reached significance levels. Religiosity did not impact attitudes towards the lesbian pairing ($p > .15$).

Finally, we analyzed whether self-monitoring impacted participants' attitudes toward PDA. No significant relationships were detected (p 's $> .15$).

Discussion

In this study, we replicated the basic pattern seen in study one, where participants who self-report higher levels of comfort with PDA demonstrate a greater level of comfort with PDA. We also demonstrate discriminant validity for our PDA measure as the results of the self-monitoring measure did not show a similar pattern of results. Finally, we replicated the basic pattern of results from study one, where comfort levels overall were neutral to high, but participants who were higher in homophobia were less supportive of gay male PDA.

Study Three

Studies one and two demonstrated that people's attitudes towards PDA generally predict their attitudes towards observed PDA. We also demonstrated in both observed interpersonal reactions and self-reported measures that people's comfort with PDA also varies based on the sexual orientation engaged in PDA, and that these responses are moderated by the sexual attitudes of the observer. However, in studies one and two we only looked at two sexual minorities (gays and lesbians). As such, in study three, we wanted to replicate our results from studies one and two while exploring another sexual minority group: transgender individuals.

Method

Participants. One hundred sixty-seven students participated in this experiment (85 males, 77 females, $M_{age} = 19.15$ years, $SD = 1.49$). The sample was comprised of 86 men, 78 women, 2 transgender, and 1 non-disclosed individual. Five participants were excluded for failing to complete a majority of the measures.

Procedure. Like study two, this study was conducted online. After completing consent, participants were asked to report their basic demographic information (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, religiosity). Next, participants watched the three videos and responded to the questions asked in studies one and two. As in study one, the order of presentation of the videos was counterbalanced using a Latin-Squares design. After rating the third video, participants were provided with information that one of the members of the couple featured in the last video identified as transgender and this individual was pointed out using their location (left or right) in the video. Participants were then asked to complete a fourth set of ratings. Finally, participants completed the Worthen's (2012) Attitudes Towards LGBT Peoples Scale (which contains multiple subscales asking about attitudes towards specific LGBT attitudes) and an adapted version of the Wright, Adams, and Bernat (1999) Homophobia Scale.

Results

Order of presentation did not interact with any of the predictors (p 's > .15) and, as such, we collapsed across orders of presentation for all subsequent analyses.

Preliminary analysis. Before analyzing the results, we again investigated the reliability and factor structure of the comfortability with PDA scale. The scale had a strong reliability ($\alpha = .901$), along with a one factor solution as suggested by an EFA using the Skree and Eigenvalue tests (Eigenvalue = 3.13). As in study one, these results highly suggest a single factor solution and, as such, we combined the items into a single score.

Primary analyses: Biological sex and scenario type. There was a significant interaction between biological sex and type of PDA ($F(3,158) = 3.57, p = .01, \eta^2_{\text{partial}} = 0.07$). This took the form that the difference between men and women (where women expressed more comfort than men) was greatest for gay PDA, whereas the difference between men and women was smallest for the lesbian PDA as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Comfortability with PDA across All Studies

	Study One		Study Two		Study Three	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Heterosexual	15.84 (1.81)	16.97 (2.37)	15.79 (3.38)	15.73 (2.92)	15.86 (3.35)	16.95 (2.66)
Gay	14.88 (1.74)	16.41 (2.52)	14.78 (3.19)	15.81 (3.62)	14.02 (4.12)	15.56 (3.59)
Lesbian	15.76 (2.40)	15.48 (2.31)	15.53 (3.11)	15.03 (4.46)	15.16 (3.52)	15.49 (3.74)
Transgender					13.75 (3.84)	14.96 (4.02)

This suggests that men showed a particular discomfort when viewing gay PDA, whereas women showed a particular discomfort to lesbian PDA. Additionally, there were two main effects. Biological sex was also a significant predictor ($F(1,160) = 4.10, p = .04, \eta^2_{\text{partial}} = 0.03$), such that women ($M = 15.74; SD = 3.89$) were more comfortable with the PDA than were the men ($M = 14.69, SD = 4.01$). There was also a significant PDA effect ($F(3,158) = 22.56, p < .01, \eta^2_{\text{partial}} = 0.30$). This main effect took the form that participants were most comfortable with the heterosexual PDA, whereas they were least comfortable with transgender displays of PDA.

Individual difference measures. Comfortability with PDA significantly affected comfort viewing all scenes of PDA ($F(3, 158) = 22.59, p < .001, \eta^2_{\text{partial}} = 0.30$). This shows that the more comfortable someone is with PDA as an individual difference, the more comfortable an individual is in seeing all types of PDA.

Homophobia attitudes. A significant interaction emerged between participant self-reported homophobic attitudes and the scenario types ($F(3,471) = 28.106, p < .001, \eta^2_{\text{partial}} = .152$). This took the form that homophobia significantly affected participant responses in the non-heterosexual scenarios, with more homophobic individuals expressing less comfort.

Gay attitudes. A significant interaction emerged between participant self-reported attitudes toward gay men and the scenario types ($F(3,450) = 11.946, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .074$). This took the form that attitudes toward gay men significantly affected participant responses in that scenario (relative to other scenarios), with more “less positive” attitudes toward gay men resulting in less comfort.

Lesbian attitudes. A significant interaction emerged between participant self-reported attitudes toward lesbians and the scenario types ($F(3,465) = 6.796, p < .001, \eta^2_{\text{partial}} = .042$). This took the form that attitudes toward lesbian women significantly impacted participant responses in that scenario (relative to other scenarios), with less positive attitudes toward lesbian women resulting in less comfort.

Bisexual attitudes. A significant interaction emerged between participant self-reported attitudes toward bisexual men and the scenario types ($F(3,477) = 14.889, p < .001, \eta^2_{\text{partial}} = .086$). This took the form that attitudes toward bisexual men significantly impacted participant responses in the gay men scenario. A significant interaction emerged between participant self-

reported attitudes toward bisexual women and the scenario types ($F(3, 465) = 15.752, p < .001, \eta^2_{\text{partial}} = .092$). This took the form that attitudes toward bisexual women significantly impacted participant responses in the lesbian scenario, with less positive attitudes toward bisexual women resulting in less comfort.

Transgender attitudes. A significant interaction emerged between participant self-reported attitudes toward transgender individuals and the scenario types ($F(3,468) = 25.653, p < .001, \eta^2_{\text{partial}} = .141$). Attitudes toward transgender individuals significantly impacted participant responses in that scenario (relative to other scenarios), with less positive attitudes toward transgender individuals resulting in less comfort.

Discussion

In this study, we replicated studies one and two, but added a component to examine attitudes toward transgender and bisexual PDA in addition to looking at comfort with lesbian, gay, and heterosexual PDA. As seen in studies one and two, we again found that participants' comfort level with PDA is highest with heterosexual PDA. Also, as seen in studies one and two, participants who self-reported greater comfort with PDA demonstrate a greater level of comfort within each PDA condition. We also found that attitudes towards sexuality (homophobia, attitudes towards bisexuals, transgender, lesbians and gays) all seem to impact the relative comfort people experience in response to the various types of PDA.

General Discussion

Across the three studies, we demonstrated that participants' personal level of comfort level with viewing PDA impacted how they perceived videos featuring demonstrations of PDA. In some ways, one could argue that this is a self-evident relationship. However, to date, no research has looked at a person's level of comfort with PDA; instead, the research has focused on drawing connections to factors beyond PDA, such as differences between cultures (e.g., Fox, 1999) or religiosity (Olson & DeSouza, 2017). As such, this is the first clear scientific demonstration there are differences in how people react to PDA based on their own comfort with PDA.

Overall, comfort levels with PDA were relatively neutral to high, which suggests a certain amount of acceptance toward PDA between individuals of all sexual orientations. Across three studies, we also demonstrated that lesbian and gay PDA is indeed seen less positively than heterosexual displays of PDA. In our third study, we demonstrated that participants perceive transgender PDA with the least amount of comfort. The finding that transgender PDA is rated lowest in comfort among participants is especially noteworthy given that the content of the videos did not change, just information pertaining to the actors in the video (suggesting that it is the participants' personal views towards sexuality that matter).

Homophobia was associated with negativity in response to these displays of PDA amongst sexual minorities, which is in line with previous researchers' findings when examining attitudes toward displays of homosexual relationships and sex (Bernat et al., 2001; Kiebel et al.,

2017; O'Handley et al., 2017; Parrott et al., 2006). When participants self-reported higher tolerance or acceptance toward sexual minorities, their results reflected higher tolerance as well.

Implications

Future research should continue to investigate the utility of our comfort with PDA measure. Although we have established initial discriminant and convergent validity across three studies, this measure would benefit from additional psychometric evaluation (across different populations and world regions). We also believe that this measure can be used by researchers in the future to investigate different effects associated with PDA. Research should be extended to look at participants who are in gay or lesbian relationships to see if they have the same perceptions of PDA as our initial, largely heterosexual samples. Finally, the ultimate establishment of validity would be provided by conducting a field study using confederates.

Limitations

The participants sampled in this study were primarily college students and as a result their attitudes toward PDA might not generalize to other groups or ages. Additionally, the present study did not look at race as a factor in this study as all of our stimuli videos feature Caucasian targets. An evaluation of race and age may yield different results based on the cultural differences that may emerge between different groups. Future studies could include transgender actors in their videos to further increase the validity of the transgender condition (although it is notable that attitudes were different while the actors remained the same). Finally, the sexual minorities represented in this study is not an exhaustive list, and work should continue to evaluate attitudes toward all sexual minorities.

Conclusion

The current study found that comfort levels with PDA were neutral to high regardless of the video subjects. However, lesbian and gay PDA is viewed with less comfort than heterosexual displays of PDA, and transgender PDA is met with the least comfort. We demonstrated that homophobia is associated with lower levels of comfort in response to these displays of PDA in sexual minorities. Finally, it was found that comfort level with PDA is associated with higher levels of comfort with PDA across conditions, but the findings still hold true that sexual minorities are met with the least comfort toward PDA.

Although the laws in the United States have become more progressive in favor of the rights of sexual minorities, these findings suggest that heterosexual individuals are still less comfortable with PDA between sexual minorities than between heterosexual couples. Gay, lesbian, and transgender individuals can legally get married in the United States, but by engaging in acts of PDA, they might face prejudiced reactions from heterosexual individuals. Even if individuals do not explicitly make these couples aware of their feelings, it was demonstrated that many heterosexual individuals had outwardly uncomfortable physical reactions to viewing PDA in sexual minorities, and as a result could still make their feelings known. We would encourage researchers and lawmakers to continue to pay attention to these issues as future laws are being considered, especially in relation to the differences in the informal rights of sexual minorities.

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Kink Community Education: Experiential Learning and Communities of Practice

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Abstract

How do people learn about kink? What are the motivations to acquire knowledge and skills for doing BDSM scenes? What are the preferred ways adults want to learn? This article argues that two concepts from adult education, *experiential learning* and *community of practice*, are important frameworks for understanding how people learn about kink. As an example to illustrate these points, some findings from an educational needs assessment are presented. The results indicate gender-related differences in motivation to learn about kink and different preferences in formats for learning. Results are discussed in terms of *experiential learning* and *community of practice*.

Introduction

How do people learn about kink? What are the motivations to acquire knowledge and skills for doing BDSM scenes, and what are the preferred ways adults want to learn about kink? There is very little research into these questions, leaving a large gap in our understanding of the development of kink identities and sexualities. To address this gap in the literature, in this article we explore two concepts from adult learning, *experiential learning* and *community of practice*, in an attempt to argue for a particular theoretical approach to learning about kink and to use some results from a community educational needs assessment to illustrate how research can proceed to address these questions.

Experiential Learning

Andragogy refers to the teaching and instructional methods used in adult education. The basic theory of andragogy was developed by Malcolm Knowles in the 1950's, and the theory proposes that: (a) adults learn better when they are given explanations of why specific concepts are being taught, (b) adults learn better in response to teaching that is centered around performing tasks, (c) adults learn better when different levels of prior experience are taken into account, and (d) adult students prefer a self-directed approach that allows for discovery on their own. Andragogy also takes into account the different learning styles of the adult learners.

Individuals who choose to learn about BDSM do so through strategies of self-directed learning (Knowles, 1975) and experiential learning (Kolb, 1984). Self-directed learning describes a process whereby an individual takes initiative to diagnose their learning needs, formulate goals for learning, and identify appropriate resources from which to learn. They also choose and implement learning strategies, and evaluate learning outcomes (Knowles, 1975). Individuals engage in a cycle of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984). First, they encounter a new experience or reinterpret an existing experience and learn by doing/feeling (concrete experience); then they reflect upon the experience (reflective observation); followed by forming new ideas or modifications to the existing ideas (abstract conceptualization); and finally apply the new ideas (active experimentation). For example, an individual might attend a BDSM workshop about rope bondage where they learn the basics of common ropes used for binding a person, how to tie knots, and where to safely place rope on a body. The attendee will consciously reflect upon their experience at the workshop and think about what they learned, possibly leading to new understandings of rope bondage or of themselves as they apply the new knowledge to future experiences. Further exploration of rope bondage might even lead to the formation of a new identity such as *rigger* or *rope bunny*.

Kolb's Experiential Learning Model (1984) suggests that individuals tend to prefer one of four learning styles: accommodator, assimilator, converger, or diverger. Individuals who prefer the accommodator style of learning tend to prefer doing things and learning through trial and error. They are attracted to new challenges, often rely on intuition rather than logic, and have a practical, experiential approach to learning. Individuals who prefer the assimilator style of learning tend to prefer using inductive reasoning, logic, and research. They often require clear explanations rather than practical opportunities, and might seem more interested in ideas and concepts, as opposed to people. Individuals who prefer the converger style of learning tend to prefer deductive reasoning, focus on specific problems, and deal with things rather than people. They are good at finding practical uses for ideas and theories. Individuals who prefer the diverger style of learning tend to prefer brainstorming and using their imagination, and are able to look at things from different perspectives. They tend to be interested in people and organizing information; prefer to watch rather than do; and gather information and use their imagination to solve problems.

Informal Learning Environments and Experiential Learning

Adults learn within formal, non-formal, and informal environments (Livingstone, 2001). Formal environments are those in which a designated teacher provides a structured curriculum related to a pre-established body of knowledge: consider, for example, courses taken within a college degree program. The learning is often long-term and there are certain program-designated requirements in order to participate. Non-formal environments are those in which a teacher facilitates opportunities for adults to learn about self-determined interests, as found in many adult and continuing education courses and workshops. The learning is often short-term and participants determine the requirements for joining. Non-formal learning is community-related, flexible, learner-centered, and self-governed. Informal environments are those in which a teacher or mentor facilitates learning without adhering to a structured body of knowledge or academic criteria for completion; this includes spontaneous and incidental learning. Informal learning often occurs within communities where members are able to observe and participate in

social activities (Paradise & Rogoff, 2009). Schugurensky suggested that informal learning includes self-directed learning; incidental learning; and socialization, or tacit learning. Bennett (2012) expanded this conceptualization by outlining four modes of informal learning: (a) self-directed learning, which is conscious and intentional; (b) incidental learning, which is conscious and unintentional; (c) tacit learning, which is non-conscious and unintentional; and (d) integrative, which is non-conscious and intentional.

Communities of Practice

Communities of practice are “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). The term refers to collective learning that occurs in a shared domain of knowledge or skill, and especially in a domain that is not recognized by general, mainstream society as something that one can be an “expert” about. So, the concept explicitly includes learning about something that is stigmatized, rejected, or devalued by general society, which would clearly apply to BDSM/kink practices and skills. A community of practice is built on joint activities and sharing of information, wherein people build relationships with each other to help each other in learning or skill acquisition—even if the practice itself may be done in private or done alone.

Lave and Wenger (1991) used the term as part of their work on apprenticeships in the area of sociocultural learning theory. Grappling with apprenticeships led to significant progress in the development of sociocultural theories of learning and development, paying attention to learning outside of a formal education structure or organization. Wenger-Trayner and others have argued that “learning is a process of identity formation, which is, becoming a different person, rather than primarily the acquisition of knowledge products” (as quoted in Omidvar & Kislov, 2014, p. 267). The sociocultural theory is a learner-centered and constructivist approach to knowledge acquisition, wherein a person’s development reflects their individual process of making sense of their experience of the world, which impacts their sense of self and their social identities, which in turn directs what they learn and how they learn. Education is seen as a self-directed process, ultimately; learning comes from intrinsic motivations and not from extrinsic pressures and influences.

This framework is useful in thinking about how people develop knowledge, acquire skills, and construct identities as they learn about kink/BDSM practices. In fact, BDSM has been described as having social networks that are “private communities of practice,” where members share specialized knowledge, technical knowledge, vocabulary and terms for self-identification, and complex interactional styles (Busbee, 2008). Some learn BDSM in the context of informal social/educational groups, while some learn through personal relationships like mentoring or with sexual partners. A framework that focuses on relational qualities and contexts, especially when there is no formal organization or system, is relevant to the kinds of learning and development people experience in terms of kink/BDSM.

Sex Education in Adulthood

It should be noted that there is very little research about adult learning when it comes to sexuality topics or domains, a gap which is starting to be addressed in the past 15 years. A number of studies report on sex education for adults with developmental disabilities (e.g., Doughty, Race & Emery, 2017). Other studies have investigated adult sex-related retail settings as places where adult sex education occurs (Herbenick & Reece, 2009; Reece, Herbenick & Sherwood-Puzzello, 2004). Nodulman (2016) reported how a small chain of adult sexual retail stores in the San Francisco Bay Area, Good Vibrations, educated customers, and found that a framework of “coaching” captured the different dimensions of the education that went on in this setting: a shared responsibility for learning between coach and client; respecting the agency of the client; recognition that clients have different motivations and goals for learning; and emphasis on fun and pleasure as an important part of the process of learning.

A Community Educational Needs Assessment

To help illustrate how *experiential learning* and *community of practice* are important concepts in future work investigating how people learn about kink, we present some findings from a community educational needs assessment. In 2009, CARAS (the Community-Academic Consortium for Research on Alternative Sexualities) conducted an educational needs assessment for the BDSM/kink communities, at the urging of some community members and leaders. The needs assessment was focused on three questions: How do most people get their BDSM education? What do most people want in their BDSM education? How does it compare to other kinds of adult education? The needs assessment was not driven by any theoretical concern, nor was it guided by any theory in designing the survey. However, we feel that presenting some results from the needs assessment can bring up some interesting questions for future research. Technically, a needs assessment is not a research project, as it does not attempt to build a theory, nor are the results expected to apply to a wider population. But the results might be useful for generating research projects, and can help in the development of the practice of education, especially for educators within BDSM/kink communities.

Methods

In the Fall of 2007, after a presentation about CARAS to a leather/kink community event, a person approached the first author and asked that CARAS conduct an educational needs assessment of the leather/kink community. Discussion by the staff and Board of CARAS about this possible project ensued, and it was adopted by CARAS in keeping with its central value of being a community-based research support organization.

CARAS pulled together two teams to work on the needs assessment project. The needs assessment was designed through the work of a Technical Team and the input and feedback of a Community Advisory Team. The Technical Team included Richard A. Sprott, Ph.D. (Project Leader), Robert Bienvenu, Ph.D., CIP, Robert Gifford, Ph.D., and Charles Glickman, Ph.D. The community advisory committee included (alphabetical): Laura Antoniou, Daddy Bo, JoAnn Kokindo, Jack McGeorge, Midori, Jack Rinella, Race Bannon and Travis Wilson. The teams worked on the assessment survey and the planned process for outreach and recruitment of

community members to participate in the educational needs assessment through most of 2008. When ready, after the survey was reviewed and evaluated by the community advisory committee, the survey went live in February of 2009 and remained open until the end of July 2009.

The CENA survey included questions about community involvement (“Currently, do you have membership in a BDSM organization or social group?”; “In the past 12 months, how many BDSM educational events have you attended?”), preferences in formats for learning (group size, mentorship, type of format for presenting information such as speakers or hands-on workshops), motivations for attending educational events, and questions about costs (“Have you not attended a BDSM educational event because it was not affordable?”; “On average, how much money do you spend to attend BDSM educational events in a year (both travel and registrations, for the entire year)?”).

Results of the CENA Survey

1,649 people started the survey. Some surveys were not completed or involved people who had never attended a BDSM educational event produced by a BDSM organization. This left 1,405 usable surveys for the main analysis, resulting in an attrition rate of 14.8% in lost or unusable surveys.

The demographics of the participants covered a wide range of sexual orientations and genders, but was 90.4% White in racial/ethnic makeup. On average, participants had been involved in leather/kink for 9.28 years, and 79% belonged to a BDSM organization. The needs assessment reflects a very specific portion of the leather/kink communities and does not represent all leather/kink/BDSM community members.

Rating of “Important” Sources of Education about BDSM

Table 1 presents the rating of importance of different sources of information and education concerning BDSM practices in 2009, comparing cisgender women, cisgender men, and transgender people.

Table 2 presents a one-way analysis of variance, comparing differences in the ratings of importance between the gender identity groups of cisgender women, cisgender men and transgender people. For cisgender men, magazines and DVDs were more important sources than for cisgender women, and workshops and national conferences were more important sources for cisgender women than cisgender men. Transgender people did not differ from either cisgender men or cisgender women, in this analysis, but any differences may be masked by the low number of transgender participants in the educational needs assessment survey.

Motivations for Learning

Five different motivations were identified by the participants for attending leather/BDSM/kink community educational events: (a) to have fun, (b) to enter the kink community, (c) to maintain relationships within the community, (d) to learn new skills, and (e) to

Table 1

Ratings of Importance of Sources of BDSM Education, by Gender

		<i>n</i>	Mean	Std. Deviation
Internet sites	Cisgender women	389	3.1311	1.01320
	Cisgender men	284	3.1866	1.10429
	Transgender people	29	2.9655	1.05162
Workshops	Cisgender women	390	4.0769	.85699
	Cisgender men	283	3.7703	.96402
	Transgender people	29	3.8621	1.09297
Books	Cisgender women	389	3.5116	.98074
	Cisgender men	282	3.4645	.95475
	Transgender people	29	3.4828	1.18384
Magazines	Cisgender women	388	1.9562	1.07863
	Cisgender men	283	2.3816	1.18319
	Transgender people	29	2.1034	1.17549
Mentoring from friend	Cisgender women	391	3.8517	1.15625
	Cisgender men	281	3.9431	1.10694
	Transgender people	29	3.8621	1.05979
Mentoring from sexual partner	Cisgender women	390	3.4590	1.24694
	Cisgender men	281	3.6406	1.24885
	Transgender people	29	3.6207	1.17758
National conference	Cisgender women	386	3.5699	1.24693
	Cisgender men	279	3.1864	1.22959
	Transgender people	28	3.7857	.95674
DVD "how to"	Cisgender women	388	1.9072	1.03761
	Cisgender men	282	2.3440	1.16539
	Transgender people	29	1.8276	1.22675
DVD porn	Cisgender women	381	1.5144	.85405
	Cisgender men	277	1.9747	1.13064
	Transgender people	29	1.5172	.91107

Mean = rating score means, where 1 = not important at all, 5 = most important

look for personal and play relationships. Participants were allowed to rate each motivation separately from the others on a 5-point Likert scale, with 0 = not important at all to 4 = most important. Table 3 presents the number of participants who rated a particular motivation to be "most important" in the list of possible motivations:

Gender differences in preferences and motivations for learning.

Of the sample, 44% identified as male, 55% identified as female, and 4% identified as transgender. Table 4 presents the differences in rating motivations for attending a BDSM educational event.

Table 2

One Way Analysis of Variance for Sources of Information about Kink, by Gender

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Internet sites	Between groups	1.499	2	.750	.677	.509
	Within groups	774.388	699	1.108		
	Total	775.887	701			
Workshops	Between groups	15.622	2	7.811	9.394	.000
	Within groups	581.211	699	.831		
	Total	596.833	701			
Books	Between groups	.364	2	.182	.190	.827
	Within groups	668.585	697	.959		
	Total	668.949	699			
Magazines	Between groups	29.648	2	14.824	11.692	.000
	Within groups	883.729	697	1.268		
	Total	913.377	699			
Mentoring from friend	Between groups	1.387	2	.694	.540	.583
	Within groups	895.934	698	1.284		
	Total	897.321	700			
Mentoring from sexual partner	Between groups	5.590	2	2.795	1.803	.166
	Within groups	1080.369	697	1.550		
	Total	1085.959	699			
National conference	Between groups	27.639	2	13.819	9.137	.000
	Within groups	1043.634	690	1.513		
	Total	1071.273	692			
DVD how to	Between groups	33.081	2	16.541	13.698	.000
	Within groups	840.432	696	1.208		
	Total	873.514	698			
DVD porn	Between groups	34.995	2	17.497	18.322	.000
	Within groups	653.235	684	.955		
	Total	688.230	686			

Some gender differences were found related to motivations for learning. Male-identified participants rated finding play partners and finding intimate relationships as more important to them, compared to female-identified participants. Female-identified participants favored supporting community, meeting people and to hear a particular speaker. These were classified together as maintaining community connections and relationships as a category. Transgender respondents were not different from either male or female identified respondents in two-way comparisons; this may be due to the assessment's lack of power to detect differences because of the low number of transgender-identified participants.

Gender differences were also found with respect to format preference. Male-identified people preferred learning in smaller groups, more hands-on experience, and preferred learning in private or BDSM community spaces. Female-identified people preferred learning in larger groups, more talk-based learning than hands-on, and preferred learning in public spaces.

Table 3

Ratings of importance of motivations or reasons to attend a BDSM educational event

		<i>n</i>	Mean	Std. Deviation
To learn a new kink, new scene, new technique	Cisgender women	389	3.5758	1.09711
	Cisgender men	281	3.5445	1.12709
	Transgender people	28	3.8571	1.14550
To hear a particular speaker / presenter	Cisgender women	389	3.5990	1.05449
	Cisgender men	281	3.2811	1.06367
	Transgender people	28	3.5000	1.10554
To meet other people interested in the topic	Cisgender women	390	3.6590	1.01359
	Cisgender men	279	3.8172	.98856
	Transgender people	28	3.7143	1.01314
To explore the BDSM community	Cisgender women	390	3.6308	1.11179
	Cisgender men	279	3.6022	1.13296
	Transgender people	27	3.3333	1.27098
To meet potential BDSM play partners	Cisgender women	390	2.2487	1.22619
	Cisgender men	280	2.9143	1.40906
	Transgender people	28	2.5000	1.23228
To meet a potential partner or partners for ongoing intimate relationships	Cisgender women	388	2.0026	1.20185
	Cisgender men	281	2.4591	1.37293
	Transgender people	28	2.4286	1.19965
To network for professional or work-related reasons	Cisgender women	389	1.9743	1.24120
	Cisgender men	281	1.8577	1.18970
	Transgender people	28	2.2500	1.45615
To connect with old friends and acquaintances	Cisgender women	388	3.5490	1.20300
	Cisgender men	280	3.2857	1.29673
	Transgender people	27	3.5926	1.50024
To support the BDSM community organization	Cisgender women	389	3.7455	1.03770
	Cisgender men	280	3.5286	1.06386
	Transgender people	28	3.7143	1.18187
To learn how to do something that a partner wants / likes to do	Cisgender women	388	3.3170	1.20293
	Cisgender men	280	3.3857	1.26483
	Transgender people	28	2.9643	1.20130
To do something fun	Cisgender women	390	4.2462	.84289
	Cisgender men	282	4.1312	.93972
	Transgender people	28	4.0000	.98131

Mean = rating score averages, where 1 = not important at all, 5 = most important

Table 4

One-way Analysis of Variance for Sources of Information about Kink, by gender

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
To learn a new kink, new scene, new technique	Between groups	2.491	2	1.245	1.009	.365
	Within groups	858.135	695	1.235		
	Total	860.626	697			
To hear a particular speaker / presenter	Between groups	16.512	2	8.256	7.345	.001
	Within groups	781.230	695	1.124		
	Total	797.742	697			
To meet other people interested in the topic	Between groups	4.075	2	2.038	2.023	.133
	Within groups	699.035	694	1.007		
	Total	703.110	696			
To explore the BDSM community	Between groups	2.249	2	1.124	.886	.413
	Within groups	879.669	693	1.269		
	Total	881.918	695			
To meet potential BDSM play partners	Between groups	72.219	2	36.109	21.271	.000
	Within groups	1179.817	695	1.698		
	Total	1252.036	697			
To meet a potential partner or partners for ongoing intimate relationships	Between groups	35.436	2	17.718	10.924	.000
	Within groups	1125.634	694	1.622		
	Total	1161.070	696			
To network for professional or work-related reasons	Between groups	5.052	2	2.526	1.670	.189
	Within groups	1051.299	695	1.513		
	Total	1056.351	697			
To connect with old friends and acquaintances	Between groups	11.886	2	5.943	3.781	.023
	Within groups	1087.731	692	1.572		
	Total	1099.617	694			
To support the BDSM community organization	Between groups	7.757	2	3.879	3.490	.031
	Within groups	771.290	694	1.111		
	Total	779.047	696			
To learn how to do something that a partner wants / likes to do	Between groups	4.679	2	2.340	1.551	.213
	Within groups	1045.315	693	1.508		
	Total	1049.994	695			
To do something fun	Between groups	3.215	2	1.608	2.035	.131
	Within groups	550.515	697	.790		
	Total	553.730	699			

Length of BDSM involvement and preferences for learning.

We asked participants when they first attended a kink educational event as one way to measure the length of their “kink career” that was relevant to an educational needs assessment from a community perspective. Only one correlation between length of community involvement and preferences for educational format was significant: The longer the involvement, the less important was the *demonstration* format for kink education.

In terms of sources for information and education, there were significant negative correlations between length of involvement and use of internet sites and workshops (internet sites and workshops were more important for people early in their kink careers), and positive correlations for magazines and national events (these were more important for people who started their kink education earlier than the advent of the Internet).

Discussion

Kink/BDSM educational workshops, meetings and mentoring involve *experiential learning*, are part of an education that is self-directed by learners, and can be productively understood as a *community of practice*. These educational concepts can illuminate why workshops and mentoring are the most important formats and sources of information and learning about kink, and why “having fun” and entering/maintaining community are important motivations for learning beyond the desire to acquire specific BDSM skills. These characteristics of kink/BDSM learning suggest that acquiring skills and knowledge about BDSM techniques and kink practices should be seen in the context of a person’s sexual identity development.

If identity development is a core process in adult learning about kink/BDSM, it should not be surprising that intersectionality of social identities will affect the learning process. The results of the 2009 Community Educational Needs Assessment found gender differences in people’s preferences for formats for learning about kink, and in motivations for learning about kink, but no gender differences in sources of information about kink. Men and women generally participate in lifelong learning at similar rates (Boeren, 2011) but often have different motivations and styles of learning (Leathwood, 2006; Grover & Miller, 2014). In the CENA survey, male-identified people were motivated more by personal one-on-one reasons, while female-identified people were motivated by community reasons, and this also carried over to their preferred formats for learning, with males preferring more private, one-on-one experiential learning in BDSM spaces, whereas females preferred more public spaces, group formats and speaker/discussion activities. These results support Leathwood’s (2006) assertion that lifelong learning practice is gendered and Grover and Miller’s (2014) findings that women are more likely than men to participate in informal discussions and meetings. Because men and women tend to have different motivations for learning and prefer different formats, educators should examine their own assumptions about gender and learning and experiment with diverse strategies to facilitate learning.

It seems, however, that a specific gender difference in adult learning format preferences and motivations might not translate across all disciplines or domains. These gender differences also attest to how processes of identity are critically important to understand how people manage and direct their own learning as adults. However, it is clear that the gender differences found in the CENA project are not similar to the gender differences in learning styles found by previous studies of science education (Heffler, 2001; Tindall and Hamil, 2004). Is there something different about kink as a domain of knowledge and practice as opposed to other domains or disciplines, leading to differences in learning styles favored or preferred by different genders?

Length of involvement in kink community events also correlated with less preference for one type of format in learning about kink: the use of demonstrations about skills and scenes. Demonstrations involve an expert or mentor performing a particular BDSM technique while a group of novices observe; given the importance of felt experience during a BDSM scene in order to know if one is doing it well, demonstrations as a format would be limited in its effectiveness in teaching/learning a skill. In the survey, length of involvement in the kink community also reflected some generational differences in sources of information, with magazines important for

people with more history in kink communities, and internet websites more important for people who recently got involved in kink communities.

Highlighting the processes of identity as impacting adult learning leads us to approach BDSM/kink education as a community of practice. The community of practice approach, in turn, can highlight particular research questions important to sex education, kink identity development, and social/cultural factors in sexuality communities from a positive sexuality perspective. Future research can explore questions such as: What is BDSM/kink identity? What motivates people to learn about BDSM or fetish? Do different motivations for learning interact with preferred learning styles, formats, or modes? Does a sense of stigma or levels of shame impact why, how, and where someone learns about BDSM, kink, or fetish?

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An Unintended Consequence of Online Directories for People Seeking Sex-Positive Psychotherapists

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Abstract

Feeling safe is an important element of successful therapy. Sexual and gender minorities often experience bias in their therapy encounters. While the existence of online directories can be valuable for people seeking sex-positive therapists, there can also be unintended negative consequences. Since most directories allow therapists to check off their areas of expertise, a therapist can indicate an expertise that they do not really have. This can result in clients not getting the help they need and even worsening their situation. This article provides recommendations as to how this can be addressed and recommendations for future research.

Introduction

Feeling safe is a core aspect of client success in psychotherapy (Siegel and Hilsenroth, 2013). Despite its importance, there is almost no research in this area. Siegel and Hilsenroth (2013) found that safety correlated with the depth of the session, how smoothly it ran, and how positive it felt to the client. It also was significantly associated with a positive therapeutic alliance. Safety is what allows clients to open up, be vulnerable, and take risks knowing they will not be judged or rejected by their therapist.

However, there is research indicating that some sexual and gender minorities may encounter bias that could interfere with feeling a sense of safety. Garnets, Hancock, Cochran, Goodchilds and Peplau (1991), Shelton and Delgado-Romero (2013), and Eady, Dobinson and Ross (2011) found negative bias against LGBQAI clients, although Eady et al. found both positive and negative experiences for bisexual clients. To address this bias, in 2000, the American Psychological Association adopted guidelines for working with LGB clients which were revised in 2012 (American Psychological Association, 2012).

Bockting, Robinson, Benner, and Scheltema, (2004) found high patient satisfaction among transgender patients who received mental health care. Willging, Salvador, and Kano (2006) did not find this in their study of transgender patients in a rural state. In a recent study, however, Bettergarcia and Israel (2018) utilized mock therapy vignettes to assess perception of the therapeutic relationship by transgender participants. Viewing a video where the therapist had a nonaffirming attitude had a significant negative effect on the participant's evaluation of the therapist and the therapeutic relationship. The American Psychology Association adopted guidelines (American Psychological Association, 2015) for working with transgender and gender non-conforming clients.

Kolmes, Stock, and Moser (2006), Lawrence and Love-Crowell (2008), Hoff and Sprott (2009), and Nichols (2006) have found evidence that some psychotherapists have negative attitudes toward kink sexuality. Ford and Hendrick (2003) found that psychotherapists were more comfortable working with clients involved in same-sex and group sex than with those involved with BDSM.

Knapp (1975) and Hymer and Rubin (1982) found that therapists often had negative attitudes towards clients involved in open relationships. Schechinger, Sakaluk, and Moors (2018) recently studied the experiences of consensually non-monogamous (CNM) clients in therapy. Finding a CNM-affirming therapist is associated with positive treatment outcomes such as experiencing less discrimination and rating a therapist as more helpful. However, one fifth of their sample, even those who specifically sought out a CNM-affirming therapist, indicated that their therapist lacked basic knowledge of CNM, and this impacted on how effective the client perceived therapy to be (Schechinger et al., 2018).

Clients who are sexual and gender minorities need a sex-positive therapist in order to feel safe to do the work they need to do. Donaghue (2015) sees sex positivity as emphasizing nonjudgmental attitudes, liberation from anti-sex attitudes, openness, and freedom. Cruz, Greenwald, and Sandil (2017) present suggestions for how therapists can incorporate sex positivity in their practice. These include exploring their personal attitudes and beliefs about sexuality, developing sex-positive knowledge and comfort about sexuality, integrating multiculturalism and social justice, proactively raising sex and sexuality as topics, and knowing the limits of bringing up sexuality in therapy.

Discussion

How can a prospective client interested in finding a sex-positive therapist find one? Many clients turn to online directories, especially *Psychology Today* (2018), regional directories and some specialized sex-positive directories, such as Polyfriendly Professionals (2018) and Kink-Aware Professionals sponsored by the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom (2018). The development of online therapy directories is what Merton (1957) would refer to as having a positive manifest function.

While I was unable to find data to confirm this, *Psychology Today* (2018) seems to dominate the marketplace for online therapy finders. Articles on online therapy directories always mention it, usually in first place, and it usually comes up in first or second place in online searches for therapists. On the *Psychology Today* (2018) site, a client can search for a therapist who indicates that they are comfortable working with transgender issues and with gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals. While a therapist can add in their profile listing that they work with people in open relationships under “Communities,” “Communities” is not on the search engine and “kink/BDSM” or “polyamory/non-monogamy” are not listed under “Issues” or “Sexuality.” In 2018 the American Psychological Association developed a task force on Consensual Non-Monogamy (Schechinger, 2018). This task force, which has improving provider directories as an initiative, was successful in advocating for *Psychology Today* (2018) to allow therapists to indicate that they were sex positive, but at this time (July 2019), clients cannot search on this information. Other popular national online therapy sites are worse. Goodtherapy (2019),

TherapyTribe, and Theravive have no ability to search for sex positive therapists. However, TherapyDen, a new site which is still small, does allow clients to search for specialties such as CNM, gender identity, kink and LGBTQAI. There are also some sex-positive sites on a local level, such as Bay Area Open Minds (2019) and GAYLESTA (2019) in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Despite the generally positive function of online directories, they can also have unforeseen consequences, described by Merton as latent dysfunctions, which are unintended and harmful. A consumer can see a listing and make assumptions about the expertise of the therapist that may not be warranted. Hill, Spiegel, Hoffman, Kivlighan, and Gelso (2017) have reviewed the literature on how therapist expertise is assessed and found a lack of adequate research. They believe this is related to the inadequate definition and operationalization of the concept of therapist expertise. They propose eight criteria for assessing expertise, along with ways of assessing each criterion. These include performance, cognitive functioning, client outcomes, experiences, personal and relational qualities of the therapist, credentials, reputation, and therapist self-assessment. While generally supporting most of Hill et al.'s work, O'Shaughnessy, Du and Davis (2017) believe that what is missing in this article is a discussion of privilege and power as it relates to who decides what makes an expert. They point out that it is professionals who are in power who set the criteria for competence, that experience and credentials by themselves do not make one an expert, that reputation is related to having the resources to network, for example, such as attending national conferences. O'Shaughnessy, Du and Davis (2017) propose that expertise is not a destination to be reached but an ongoing process and that there are many ways of being an expert therapist. They support measuring client outcomes as being the primary way to assess expertise.

While this issue of presumed expertise is much broader than appropriate affirming therapy for sexual and gender minorities, given the negative stigma and lack of accurate information for this population that could occur, the consequences could be particularly serious. All directories ask therapists to self-select their specialty areas and usually no one verifies what the therapist lists. The therapist can claim expertise even if this involves attending only one two-hour training. Therapists who are trying to build a practice often make the misguided assumption that it is best to list expertise in as many categories as possible.

All mental health professions address the issue of scope of practice in their licensing laws. A competent therapist should not work outside of the area of their expertise. While personal experience can be an important element of establishing expertise, a therapist may not be sensitive to the diversity within different communities. Most therapists would acknowledge that a therapist does not need to be a member of a community in order to effectively work with its members. This is especially true in areas where the pool of potential therapists is small.

There is no research on client's use of online directories to find therapists. I have compiled some anecdotes indicating that there may be negative unintended consequences that are consistent with the research on the bias of psychotherapists against sexual and gender minorities in therapy. J.S. Very (2018), a licensed marriage and family therapist, describes their experience with a cisgender male therapist who advertised as being "trans-friendly." After two years of therapy, not only did the therapist refuse to write the letter for Very to change their driver's

license, but he told Very that he did not know how to write such a letter and refused to pursue any additional training or consultation on working with transgender clients. Clearly this therapist was not comfortable with Very's identity as transgender. This is a huge contradiction for a therapist who states they are "trans-friendly." Very states that in their current therapy practice, their clients spend most of their sessions working on the trauma from working with previous therapists who indicated that they were "trans-friendly" or "trans-competent" therapists.

In another example, a therapist indicated in an online directory that she is a member of the American Association of Sex Addiction Therapists, specializes in sex addiction treatment, and is a sex-positive therapist. Identifying as a sex addiction therapist while also claiming to be sex-positive would strike many sex-positive therapists as contradictory. Sex addiction is a very controversial diagnosis that is not listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders V* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors, and Therapists, the largest national association that certifies sex therapists, published a statement in 2016 stating that there is not enough evidence to support a sex or pornography addiction diagnosis and such a diagnosis can be used in harmful ways. While sex-positive therapists acknowledge that there are people who use their sexuality in ways that negatively impacts their lives, most are unlikely to use the diagnosis of sex-addiction.

A therapist reported to me that his partner used an online directory to find a therapist who was comfortable working with transgender issues. When the prospective client started talking about the WPATH standards (World Professional Association for Transgender Health, 2011) the therapist did not know what this was and said he would have to study up on it. Knowledge of these standards is considered a core competency for therapists working with transgender people.

A member posted on a listserv of sex positive therapists I am on stating that she ("Ellen") was moving into my community and was interested in starting a private practice using post-degree therapists who were working on accumulating hours for their licenses. I posted a reply welcoming Ellen to the community and suggested we get together to network. I said that I had done clinical supervision for many years and suggested that as a newcomer Ellen might want to look at working for an agency first. Ellen sent an angry reply, apparently offended at the idea that she should start at an agency and accused me of trying to undercut her business. Shocked by this unprofessional response, I decided to look more into Ellen's background. I checked Ellen's license and found that she had been licensed one and a half years. In California, a therapist with Ellen's license is required to have been licensed at least two years before doing clinical supervision. I found Ellen's LinkedIn profile and discovered that Ellen had gone to a Christian Evangelical graduate program and all her relevant clinical experience was in the public mental health sector. Nowhere did I see anything indicating that Ellen had any experience relevant to working with transgender or LGBTQ or open relationship or kinky populations, despite listing herself in a directory for sex-positive therapists. I contacted a member of the board. While the board member shared my concerns, they stated that the Board did not feel it was appropriate to determine if someone practiced consistent with the organization's mission. It would seem that a prospective client would assume that anyone listed in this directory would be sex-positive. Would this organization have said the same thing if someone listed that they specialized in reparative therapy?

Conclusion

What can be done to address these concerns about online directory listings for those who are seeking sex-positive therapists?

Consumers need to be encouraged to inquire about the stated expertise of their therapist. If possible, they should get feedback from people in the sex-positive community. Some useful questions could be: What percentage of their clientele has been from this community? What trainings have they received? Do they have personal experience with the community? Teachers and workshop trainers, especially those who do introductory workshops on working with sexual and gender minorities, should bring up the issue of claiming expertise on working with these populations if it is based solely on their attendance in one workshop or class.

Therapists need to be more mindful of what they indicate as their expertise. They should ask themselves: How many clients have I seen from this community? How comfortable was I doing this work? How successful was the work? What training have I received? Has it been recent? Am I a member of this community or do I have close friends or family members who are? If I am a member or close friend, am I aware of the diversity that exists within these communities? If the therapist answers these questions with a no, they should not indicate that they are an expert.

When therapists refer clients to therapists they do not personally know or know only by reputation, they should carefully review directory listings and web sites and perhaps Google them. If a therapist indicates that they are comfortable working with LGBTQAI clients, but in their description of how they work with couples, all their examples are about heterosexual couples, this should raise a concern.

Directories could be more aware of this issue. It is not realistic to expect them to verify the expertise of the therapists who list with them. But they could ask therapists to be mindful of this issue in their instructions and give some suggestions as to what might constitute expertise with a community. They could ask therapists to list the 3 to 5 major population groups they serve and then allow them to select other groups.

In smaller therapist organizations, board members could contact new listees and welcome them, informing them of the work the organization does to promote sex-positive psychotherapy, ask why they joined, and how their interests coincide with the organization.

This discussion suggests some areas for future research. What are the common ways that clients find therapists? Is there a difference in outcomes based on how the therapist was found? What has been the experience of clients who have found therapists who have identified as sex-positive? How do therapists identify their areas of expertise when they fill out their profiles? Do therapy sites provide guidelines for therapists in this area? What happens if someone complains about what they feel is an inaccuracy in a listing?

Overall, online therapy directories have been a helpful resource for clients to find sex-positive therapists and for therapists who have this expertise to reach out to prospective clients,

especially in rural and conservative areas. The prospective client needs to be aware that what they see online may not be accurate. Sex-positive therapists should be encouraged to raise this issue whenever they have an opportunity.

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Submission Guidelines

We invite the submission of original manuscripts on any topics relevant to positive sexuality. We encourage submissions from diverse epistemological perspectives, and we welcome a wide range of quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches, as well as theoretical and conceptual essays. Alongside the work of scholars and students, we are interested in contributions from community, clinical, and other nonacademic professionals, especially contributions that help strengthen the connection between the study and practice of positive sexuality.

While the *Journal of Positive Sexuality* has a preference for shorter manuscripts (2,000–3,000 words), longer manuscripts up to 10,000 words will be considered. In preparation for submission, authors should observe the following guidelines:

- Manuscripts should have a clear sex-positive focus.
- Given the diverse readership of the journal, authors should write in a straight-forward and non-technical manner, avoiding jargon when possible. Manuscripts should be written such that they can be easily understood by scholars and professionals outside of one's own field or discipline.
- Manuscripts should be written in a style consistent with the latest edition of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA). Please include DOIs for all references when available. Instead of endnotes, please use footnotes when necessary.

New submissions should be emailed to submissions@journalofpositivesexuality.org, and should include the following Microsoft Word attachments:

- A title page, including: (1) the title of the manuscript; (2) names, institutional affiliations, and contact information for each author; (3) the word count of the main manuscript; (4) a statement certifying that the submission has not been previously published and/or is not currently under review elsewhere; (5) any pertinent information about the approval or regulatory process for human subjects research; (6) any acknowledgements that the authors would like to include for publication.
- A fully-blinded manuscript, including: (1) the title of the manuscript; (2) a brief abstract, 100 words or less; (3) the body of the manuscript; (4) references
- Any tables or figures should be submitted in separate files in either Microsoft Word or Microsoft Excel format.

Manuscripts will be reviewed initially by the Editor-in-Chief and/or Associate Editors. Appropriate manuscripts will then be sent out for double-blind peer review by at least two reviewers. While not always possible, the *Journal of Positive Sexuality* strives to return editorial decisions within two months of submission.

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