

JOURNAL OF POSITIVE SEXUALITY

Volume 6, Number 1, April 2020

The journal of the Center for Positive Sexuality, a 501c3 non-profit organization.

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Release Within Confinement: An Alternative Proposal for Managing the Masturbation of Incarcerated Men in U.S. Prisons

Sam D. Hughes
University of California, Santa Cruz (USA)
sadhughe@ucsc.edu

Abstract

Policies regarding masturbation among incarcerated men vary throughout the United States. To describe the state of these policies, a systematic review of prison masturbation policies was conducted. The review revealed that masturbation among incarcerated men is banned in most U.S. prisons (sometimes in all cases, and other times only when it is intended to disturb others, and/or is public). Furthermore, many states' Departments of Corrections have made these policies difficult for the public to identify. Prison masturbation bans have been defended on the grounds that they reduce STI transmission, help maintain order, prevent hostile work environments for female prison staff, assist in prison rape prosecutions, and assist in rehabilitating incarcerated people. By reviewing the available social science and endocrinological research on masturbation, those justifications are found to have minimal basis in scientific evidence. Conversely, the evidence does suggest the masturbation bans could potentially be linked with higher rates of violence, rape, exploitation, sex offender recidivism, insomnia, stress, depression, and suicide. Instead of being rooted in evidence, bans on prison masturbation seem to be primarily motivated by sex-negativity and the desire to retributively punish incarcerated people. To alleviate these harms, this article suggests allowing incarcerated men to masturbate within specifically identified circumstances, and/or to lessen existing punishments for masturbation. Potential problems with the implementation of the suggested policy are discussed, and a call is made to make inmate handbooks, which contain most of these policies, available to the public. Unique opportunities for penological and sexological research are identified.

Introduction

In 2006, the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals took up a unique case. Angela Harris, a female correctional officer in Georgia was sued by a man incarcerated in prison on the grounds that her behavior toward him violated the cruel and unusual punishment clause of the Eighth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. While the man was held in solitary confinement, Harris allegedly forced him to strip and masturbate for her entertainment, threatened to deny him food and, ironically, threatened to file a disciplinary report that he had masturbated in front of her if he did *not* comply with her demands (*Boxer X v. Harris*, 2006). Surprisingly, over a scathing dissent, the court decided to affirm the lower court decision to dismiss the case, concluding,

On the facts as alleged in the complaint, however, Boxer has failed to meet this standard. We conclude that a female prison guard's solicitation of a male prisoner's manual masturbation, even under the threat of reprisal, does not present more than *de minimis* injury. Accordingly, we affirm the dismissal of Boxer's claim under the Eighth Amendment. (*Boxer X v. Harris*, 2006)

This case, which has been cited more than 100 times in subsequent decisions, is representative of the conflicted nature of attitudes toward prison masturbation. On the one hand, masturbation is officially banned in most U.S. prisons (B. Smith, 2006; see systematic review below) on the justification that masturbation, just like any other form of sexual expression, is harmful to incarcerated people and the healthy functioning of the prison environment (Cusack, 2014). Yet, on the other hand, being forced to masturbate on the threat of starvation is not considered by the criminal justice system to be harmful enough to incarcerated people to constitute a serious injury, especially if the person being forced to masturbate is male (Coker, 2014). Instead, it is thought of as trivial. This conflicted attitude toward masturbation as harmful/not harmful and important/trivial warrants further investigation.

Thus, in this article, I will report the methods and results of a systematic analysis of publicly available policies regarding masturbation by males in U.S. prisons. After establishing the current state of these policies, I will then review the historical context that led up to the ban and investigate the empirical literature and case law that exists on the masturbation of incarcerated men. Next, I will scrutinize the justifications employed to defend the ban on masturbation in U.S. prisons and contend that the ban results in serious negative consequences for both incarcerated people and the prison environment as a whole. As an alternative, I will lay out a new policy proposal for handling masturbation within U.S. prisons. Finally, I will anticipate and respond to potential objections to that proposed policy.

Systematic Review Method

In order to determine the current state of regulations regarding male masturbation in U.S. prisons, a systematic review of publicly available regulations was conducted. This review was undertaken by three coders using the following procedure.

First, for each state in the United States (and the District of Columbia), we accessed the jurisdiction's Department of Corrections website. We then attempted to locate a repository of policies, regulations, and/or documents regarding the running of prisons by navigating through each website. Once a repository of documents was identified, we then looked at the titles of each policy document and made a determination of whether or not the policy document would have any reasonable degree of likelihood to discuss sexuality. For each document that was determined to potentially include that subject, the document was opened, and an automated search was conducted for the words "sex*," "masturb*," "touch*," and "ejacul*." Each clause that returned a hit was evaluated for whether or not it was a clause regarding the regulation of masturbation by incarcerated men. If a regulation was identified, it was collected for use in this review.

Second, if no policies were found on the Department of Corrections website, coders then searched the University of Michigan Law School Policy Clearinghouse for inmate handbooks for each state (often only available as a result of a successful Freedom of Information Act Request) and conducted an automated search of each handbook using the same four keywords. Each clause that returned a hit was evaluated for whether or not it was a clause regarding the regulation of masturbation by incarcerated men. If a regulation was identified, it was collected for use in this review.

Third, if no policies were found in the Policy Clearinghouse, a google search was then conducted using each of the following search terms: “[state name] doc masturbation,” “[state name] doc sexual misconduct,” “[state name] doc inappropriate sexual behavior,” “[state name] doc ejaculation,” “[state name] doc inmate handbook.” The first page of results was reviewed, and each search result was evaluated as to whether it would have any reasonable degree of likelihood to discuss prison masturbation policies. For each search result that was determined to potentially discuss the subject, an automated search of each search result’s page (or attached document if the page was a link) was conducted using the same four keywords (i.e., “sex*,” “masturb*,” “touch*,” and “ejacul*.”) Each clause that returned a hit was evaluated for whether or not it was a clause regarding the regulation of masturbation by incarcerated men. If a regulation was identified, it was collected for use in this review.

Fourth, if no policies were found at this point, a google news search was conducted using the search terms: “[state name] doc masturbation,” “[state name] doc sexual misconduct,” “[state name] doc inappropriate sexual behavior,” “[state name] doc ejaculation.” The first two pages of results were then evaluated to determine if any of the news stories had any reasonable degree of likelihood to discuss prison masturbation policies. For a news article that was determined to potentially discuss the subject, an automated search of the news article was conducted using the same four keywords (i.e., “sex*,” “masturb*,” “touch*,” and “ejacul*.”) Each clause that returned a hit was evaluated for whether or not it was a clause regarding the regulation of masturbation by incarcerated men. If a regulation was identified, it was collected for use in this review.

Fifth, if a document was identified during steps two through four, the name of the document was then run through another google search to determine if a more recently updated document was publicly available. The first page of search results was then reviewed.

Finally, if no documents or policies were identified in any of the first four stages above, the state was marked as having no publicly available policy.

After the text of each policy was collected, the author conducted a conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to identify the potential coding categories that emerged from the text of these policies, and then coded each policy into its relevant emergent category.

Systematic Review Results

Six coding categories emerged through the conventional content analysis: (a) All Masturbation Banned, (b) All Public Masturbation Banned, (c) Public Masturbation Banned with Ambiguous Intentionality, (d) Intentional Public Masturbation Banned, (e) No Policy Publicly Available, But Likely Exists, and (f) No Policy Publicly available. Thirty-seven states plus the District of Colombia maintained some form of publicly available policy banning masturbation (see Table 1 for a summary and examples), either in all circumstances (six states), if it is seen by another person, even if not intentionally (seven states), or either ambiguously or clearly requiring that it be intentionally public (17 states). Of the remaining 13 states without a publicly available policy, three states had some form of news coverage indicating such a policy existed, despite the

Table 1

Systematic Review Results			
Policy	Definition	Example Policy Text	States
All Masturbation Banned	The policy forbids masturbation and does not indicate the masturbation must take place in public.	"A person who is detained in a facility may not... Intentionally masturbate." (Florida Inmate Orientation Handbook)	Alabama, Arizona, California, Florida, Illinois, Kentucky, North Carolina, Ohio, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Utah, Vermont, Washington, Wyoming
All Public Masturbation Banned	The policy forbids masturbation in the presence or sight of others, but does not indicate, either clearly, or ambiguously, that it must be intentionally in the sight or presence of others.	"Sexualized Behavior — Sexual contact committed by an inmate including, but not limited to... masturbation in the presence of others." (Arkansas Administrative Directive: Prison Rape Elimination Act, 2017)	Arkansas, Colorado, Georgia, Hawaii, ¹ New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas
Public Masturbation Banned with Ambiguous Intentionality	The policy forbids masturbation in the presence or sight of others using the term "indecent exposure," but does not define whether the indecent exposure must be intentional or not.	"Violation Category B (Serious Violations):... Inappropriate sexual behavior with another person or indecent exposure (masturbation)." (Mississippi Inmate Handbook)	Iowa, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, New Hampshire, New Jersey
Intentional Public Masturbation Banned	The policy forbids masturbation in the presence or sight of others, but specifies it must be intentional and/or for the purpose of disturbing or offending others.	"An inmate shall not engage in lewd conduct by intentionally masturbating in the presence of an employee, or intentionally exposing the private parts of his or her body." (Official Compilation of Codes, Rules and Regulations of the State of New York)	Kansas, Louisiana, Maine, Michigan, New York, North Dakota, Washington, Washington D.C., West Virginia, Wisconsin
No Policy Publicly Available, But Likely Exists	The state does not have a publicly available prison masturbation policy, but news stories or external organizations indicate such a policy exists.	"Acts that are considered sexual misconduct include some of the following actions, but not all... Masturbating in front of an inmate or a staff member... Touching one's self in a sexual way." (Disability Law Center of Alaska, 2016)	Alaska, Delaware, South Carolina
No Policy Publicly Available	The state does not have a publicly available prison masturbation policy and no news stories or external organizations indicate such a policy exists.	N/A	Connecticut, ² Indiana, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nebraska, Nevada, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Virginia

¹Hawaiian inmates are typically sent to a private prison in Arizona, Saguaro Correctional Center with a different policy than the Arizona DOC.

²A bill was proposed in 2012 (SB 367) in Connecticut to make masturbation a crime if done in a correctional institution, though not passed.

fact that it was not accessible via the systematic review process. The implications of the existence of policies that punish people for masturbating, while not being available to the public, will be discussed in the conclusion to this article. Thus, masturbation is currently banned in some form in most U.S. prisons (Cusack, 2014; McGaughey & Tewksbury, 2002). While typically banned as part of a larger statute that prevents sexual behavior of any kind among incarcerated men, occasionally masturbation is addressed specifically within state penal codes. For example, the Texas penal code allows for masturbation within prisons only if no one else is made aware that the incarcerated man is masturbating (Stephens, 2015). However, given the nature of prisons as semi-public spaces with little to no privacy (Cusack, 2014), this kind of policy is effectively a ban on masturbation. After all, it includes a rule that says, “you will not be punished for masturbating if you do not get caught.” In function, this is identical to an outright ban, since under a ban on masturbation, it is still the case that incarcerated men are not punished for masturbating if they do not get caught. Only bans that explicitly require intentionality (which appear to only exist in ten states) are distinct from an outright ban on masturbation. While such a policy has been challenged on the grounds that it constitutes cruel and unusual punishment, there is clear precedent in the case law justifying the constitutionality of a ban on prison masturbation, as it does not violate the Eighth Amendment (*Rodgers v. Ohio Dept. Of Rehab. & Corr.*, 1993). Consequently, these policies remain widespread and legal.

Historical Context

Putting a person into a prison environment has typically entailed depriving them of sexual relationships with people outside of the prison, historically termed the “deprivation of heterosexual relationships” by Sykes (1958, p. 70). This leads most incarcerated people to respond to that loss by masturbating as a way to cope with their sexual needs (Hensley, Tewksbury, & Wright, 2001). Because this is such a typical strategy for coping with sexual loss as a pain of incarceration, there has been an accompanying long history of prisons seeking to prohibit the masturbation activities of incarcerated people on the basis of sex-negative assumptions. For example, prison reformers and administrators in the mid-1800s expressed explicit concern over incarcerated people engaging in “onanism,” concerned that masturbation would lead to mental illness. One guard even proposed that inflicting blisters on the penises of incarcerated men would serve as a “remedy” (Rubin, 2015). In the recent past, around the 1980s, policies had become much more lenient. For example, Wooden and Parker (1982) found that as long as the masturbation was not done in a threatening manner or interfering with prison functioning, it was permitted within the prison they studied. However, since the 1980s, there may have been an increase in harsher punishments for masturbation, based on anecdotal news media coverage of harsher punishments ranging from charging men with indecent exposure to solitary confinement (Johns, 2012; Murphy, 2016). Similarly, the systematic review conducted for this article found that most states have some rule against masturbation in their prisons. So, this difference between the current treatment of masturbation and the treatment of masturbation in the recent past motivates the question: How did prisons move from fairly lenient policies toward masturbation by incarcerated men to more punitive policies (though not nearly as punitive as punishments in the far past)? To answer that question, this section will discuss two trends in the penal system that may have contributed to the maintenance of policies that explicitly ban masturbation: the rise of mass incarceration and the rise of faith-based prison programs.

Mass Incarceration

The rise of mass incarceration may have led to tougher enforcement of laws regarding masturbation. Beginning in the 1970s, more punitive approaches to policing, such as the war on drugs, broken windows policing, three strikes rules, and the widespread adoption of mandatory minimum sentences led to significantly more crowded prisons and much higher rates of incarceration in the United States, especially in African American communities (Alexander, 2010). Both in comparison to the history of the United States, and also in comparison to all other countries in the world, the United States maintains the highest per capita rate of incarceration by far (Alexander, 2010; Glaze & Kaeble, 2014; Haney & Zimbardo, 1998). The higher concentrations of incarcerated African American men, in particular, also fed off of racist fears of black masculinity as aggressive, animalistic sexuality in need of control (Kunzel, 2010). At the material level, crowded prisons have very little private space, as some prisons house hundreds of incarcerated men in a single large bunk-style room, or house four people per cell. As a result, it is challenging for many incarcerated men to find spaces to masturbate without being in public to some extent. Because public masturbation is illegal (Cusack, 2014), and 37 states have some form of publicly available policy banning public masturbation among incarcerated people specifically, the lack of private spaces in many prisons due to mass incarceration may play a significant role in the serious punitive measures undertaken by prison guards to curb prison masturbation.

Faith-Based Prison Programs

Since 2001, faith-based, and especially Protestant-oriented prison rehabilitation programs have gained popularity within the U.S. prison system (Camp et al., 2006). Faith-based prison programs, especially those designed for sex offenders, often emphasize self-restraint of sexuality and “lustful urges,” including avoiding masturbation as a way to gain mastery over one’s demons. For example, the InnerChange Freedom Initiative, a program ruled unconstitutional by the U.S. District Court, taught that masturbation was a sin and a disease that needed to be overcome through faith and devotion to God (*Americans United for Separation of Church and State v. Prison Fellowship Ministries, Inc.*, 2007; Cooperman, 2006; Crockett, 2012). It is likely that the ban on masturbation, in the eyes of prison officials who supported such programs, would help incarcerated people to align themselves with the goals of these faith-based programs and engage in character building through self-control.

Current Status of Prison Masturbation Behaviors

Currently, only four studies have attempted to assess the rates of masturbation within U.S. prisons, despite the dozens of studies on prison sexuality generally, and especially prison rape (McGaughey & Tewksbury, 2002). In addition, the four studies span nearly thirty years, from 1972 to 2001. As a result, their findings might be conflated with the idiosyncrasies of the prisons they studied, or societal changes in the prison population over that same time. Nevertheless, given that caveat, all four studies reached the same conclusion about the rates of male prison masturbation: nearly all incarcerated men masturbate while in prison (Hensley et al., 2001; Kassebaum, 1972; Tewksbury, 1989; Wooden & Parker, 1982). This comports with the long-standing data on men in the United States outside of prison, which reports practically all

men having masturbated at least once, and most men having masturbated recently (Baumeister et al., 2001; Kinsey et al., 1948).

While many incarcerated men manage to avoid being seen or punished for their masturbation, by masturbating under a blanket or while a guard is not watching, those who are caught can receive serious punishment. For example, 83-year-old South Boston convict “Whitey” Bulger was caught touching his genitals alone in his cell at 3:00 a.m. and placed in solitary confinement for a full month (Murphy, 2016). But the punishment does not stop with the person who is incarcerated. Wardens have been advised to contact the non-incarcerated family members of incarcerated men who masturbate in order to pressure the family members into getting the men to stop masturbating (Bedard, 2011). Even in innocuous cases, men are sometimes sentenced to additional time in prison. For instance, Terry Lee Alexander of Florida was caught masturbating in his cell by himself when a female sheriff witnessed the act from 100 feet away in a control tower. When the state decided to press charges of indecent exposure against him, the sheriff even acknowledged that most incarcerated people masturbate (Batty, 2007). He was found guilty and sentenced to two additional months in prison. Given the harsh treatment of incarcerated men for masturbation, there is a significant burden to justify the severe punishment inflicted upon them.

Justification for the Ban on Masturbation

Because prison masturbation is so understudied (McGaughey & Tewksbury, 2002) as well as because masturbation generally has been stigmatized (Rosewarne, 2014; Soble, 1997), very little has been written to justify the ban on prison masturbation. Only one academic article has been written explicitly defending it (Cusack, 2014). Nevertheless, the following five justifications seem to represent the primary arguments made by defenders of the ban on masturbation.

STI Transmission

Masturbation has long been considered as an alternative safer sex practice to prevent STI transmission in the general population. However, within prisons, it has been implicated, without evidence, to be associated with STI transmission by the court case that upheld the right of prisons to ban the masturbation of incarcerated people (*Rodgers v. Ohio Dept. Of Rehab. & Corr.*, 1993). Because semen can be a carrier for certain types of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), some defenders of the masturbation ban argue that the ejaculation of semen through masturbation could spread the infection. Thus, it is justifiable to ban masturbation in the name of preventing STI transmission.

Order

The other justification for the ban to come out of *Rodgers v. Ohio* is the need to maintain order within a prison. The argument is usually articulated as follows: Prisons typically contain few to no areas of privacy, so masturbation in prison constitutes masturbation in public (Cusack, 2014). To prevent public masturbation, and the disorder and conflict it can cause between

incarcerated people, therefore, it is justified to prevent masturbation. Prison authorities have also cited order as a justification in the popular press (e.g., Johns, 2012).

Hostile Work Environment

As policies regarding the hiring of prison guards have become less sexist, there has been an uptick in the number of female prison guards working in male prisons. As a result of a more gender-diverse prison staff, there has also been an increase in female guards witnessing incarcerated men masturbate and suing the prison for creating a hostile work environment (e.g., *Freitag v. Ayers*, 2009). Thus, in order to prevent lawsuits and ensure that female prison guards can work without witnessing masturbation, it is justified to ban masturbation (Cusack, 2014). Prison staffers have also focused on the concern in popular media sources over incarcerated people masturbating in sight of female correctional staff as a justification for these bans (e.g., Dold, 2017).

Rape Prosecution

It is very challenging to prosecute rape in U.S. prisons, because rape is conflated with prostitution and trading sex for “safety” (Money & Bohmer, 1980). As a result, any amount of evidence can be critical in these cases in order to bring prison rapists to justice. Cusack (2014) contends that a ban on prison masturbation is justified because it can make any semen emission found within a prison reliable physical evidence in the prosecution of rape. To account for semen emissions made as a result of nocturnal emissions, she argues that incarcerated people should report all of their nocturnal emissions to correctional officers.

Rehabilitation

Finally, Cusack (2014) also argues that masturbation can cause depression, loss of energy, hair loss, and vision loss. To support these claims, Cusack (2014) cites two non-peer reviewed articles, one of which does not actually discuss several of these supposed harms (Witt, 2013), and the second of which seems to have been removed from the *Psychology Today* website (Robinson, 2010). These arguments echo similar arguments from the mid-1800s, claiming masturbation causes blindness and mental disorders, used to justify the prohibition of sexual expression in prisons of the time as well (Janofsky, 2004). Similarly, she argues that incarcerated people will use masturbation to avoid having to think about what they have done, and that masturbation is counterproductive to the work and energy of rehabilitating. Thus, she argues, because part of the goal of prison is to rehabilitate incarcerated people, and masturbation is counterproductive to that goal and harmful, prisons are justified in banning masturbation.

Does the Policy Work?

Each of the five justifications for the ban on masturbation fails to provide a good reason to defend the ban, largely because the ban on masturbation has not been effective in achieving its goals. To begin, incarcerated people’s high rates of STIs are attributed to sex between incarcerated persons (Center for Disease Control, 2015), rather than accidental infection from masturbation. The impact of masturbation, if it spreads HIV at all, seems very minimal in

comparison with the effect of prison sex and prison rape (Potter & Rosky, 2014). If the primary goal of the ban on masturbation is to prevent the spread of STIs, but unintentionally increases the likelihood of prison rape (as I will argue below), banning masturbation could actually be increasing the rate of STI transmission, rather than preventing it. Instead, other policies such as providing condoms to incarcerated people may be a more promising alternative to achieve this goal (Sylla et al., 2010).

Female prison guards also continue to be subjected to incarcerated men intentionally masturbating in their sight, despite the ban. While this is certainly a serious problem, and the proposed alternative policy in this article tries to protect employees such as female correctional officers from these forms of sexual harassment, simply banning masturbation by incarcerated people may not be an effective strategy. For example, past research outside of correctional settings has found that sexual aggression is predicted by sexual frustration and dissatisfaction (Kanin, 1983). It is possible that, if the ban is leading to more sexual frustration among incarcerated men who may not have an outlet for their sexual urges, the ban may unintentionally lead to increases in impulsive acts of harassment against female staff.

Cusack's (2014) suggestion to require all incarcerated men to report all of their nocturnal semen emissions to correctional officers does not appear to have been taken up by any prison (perhaps because doing so would be cumbersome, dehumanizing, and engender substantial resistance from incarcerated people). However, even if this suggestion were taken up, it still rests on the flawed assumption that all semen outside of nocturnal emissions would be evidence of rape. If any semen outside of a nocturnal emission was considered evidence of rape, and most incarcerated men do masturbate, many of these acts of masturbation could be wrongly construed as rape.

Additionally, rather than creating order and preventing conflict between incarcerated people by banning masturbation, incarcerated people seem to be coordinating with one another to hide all sexual acts from prison guards, especially among incarcerated men (Vidal, 2014). This often involves one cellmate acting as a lookout for guards, called "bussing" in some prisons, while the other cellmate engages in sex or masturbation. Rather than fostering order, the ban fosters the coordinated subversion of order within prisons by encouraging incarcerated people to work together to thwart prison officials' enforcement of bans on any form of sexual expression.

Finally, if the goal of banning masturbation in prison is to prevent recidivism, especially among sex offenders, the ban is not supported by social science. A randomized experimental trial conducted at the University of Toronto found that people with pedophilic disorder who were assigned to refrain from masturbating for one month were no different in their levels of pedophilic fantasies than those who did not refrain (Rudin-Brown et al., 1996). Only a single participant agreed that prohibiting masturbation was helpful to their recovery, and many participants simply were not able to refrain from masturbating for a full month. Similarly, banning masturbation prevents other techniques that may be valuable in the treatment of sex offenders, such as helping incarcerated people learn about healthy sexual practices and habits (B. Smith, 2006). Though Cusack (2014) claims that masturbation reduces rehabilitation, she uses a blog post account of a single incarcerated person in prison to support her argument (Goad, 2013). There does not seem to be good evidence to support that claim.

Unintended Consequences

In addition to not achieving the goals that the ban on prison masturbation was intended to reach, the ban may also lead to serious unintended consequences for the wellbeing and safety of incarcerated people. While it is the case that nearly all incarcerated men masturbate, the exact rate of masturbation is unknown, so it is challenging to know the exact effect of the ban. However, presumably, given the serious punitive consequences if an incarcerated person is caught, as well as the lack of private space within prisons, it is reasonable to assume that incarcerated people masturbate less frequently than they would if the ban was not in place. This section will discuss the potential negative consequences of banning masturbation under the assumption that the policy does in fact reduce masturbation among incarcerated people.¹

Violence and Rape

Over the last two decades, behavioral endocrinology has come to better understand the neurological basis for impulsivity and sexual violence. It does seem to be the case that higher testosterone levels are associated with higher sexual motivation and that changes in testosterone levels play a more significant role in affecting sexual motivation than the absolute level of testosterone (Sherwin, 2013). Higher testosterone levels and aggression-impulsivity scores are found among convicted male rapists than among the general population of men (Giotakos et al., 2003). And for younger sex offenders, higher levels of testosterone were found in violent rapists than in non-violent rapists (Rada, 1983). Additionally, lower levels of serotonin-producing activities have been pointed out as a potential cause of impulsivity (Giotakos et al., 2003).

Masturbation is an activity that both tends to lower receptivity to testosterone, as well as release serotonin to end an orgasm, creating a subjective feeling of sexual satiety and preventing immediate sexual arousal following orgasm in men (Corona et al., 2009; for a relevant study on male rates, see Phillips-Farfán, Lemus, & Fernández-Guasti, 2007) While one early study found heightened levels of testosterone immediately after masturbating (Purvis et al., 1976) and returning to normal shortly thereafter, a more relevant study found significantly heightened levels of testosterone in males who had avoided masturbating for three weeks (Exton et al., 2001). In other words, banning masturbation increases testosterone, which may be associated with higher rates of violence, impulsivity, and rape. This may be amplified by a lack of masturbation, leading to men producing lower levels of serotonin. Thus, the endocrinological

¹ If, alternatively, the ban on masturbation has no effect on the rate of actual masturbation, then the ban should be removed on its face, because it would be punishing people while having no effect on the behavior it intends to curb. One might respond to this claim by emphasizing a retributivist approach to incarceration, such as hypothetically claiming, “even if the policy does not reduce masturbation, it is still a good policy because it punishes people, and people are in prison to be punished; that is the point of prison.” However, this approach would be flawed on several grounds. First, such a policy would be arbitrary. It is not clear why this particular form of recreation (masturbation) ought to be the target for punishment, as opposed to any other form of recreation (such as physical exercise, watching television, or reading), which are not routinely banned in prisons, if the purpose of prison is simply to punish recreation. Second, and more importantly, maintaining heavily punitive policies toward incarcerated people is associated with dehumanization and abuse of incarcerated people (Haney & Zimbardo, 2009). Suggesting an ineffective policy should remain on the books simply by virtue of it allowing the prison to punish people simply sets the stage for justifying any harmful treatment as punishment, leading to the unjust abuse and dehumanization of incarcerated people.

evidence seems to at least tentatively support the claim that banning masturbation increases impulsive, violent sexual behavior among incarcerated people.

Exploitation by Guards

Like Angela Harris, the guard who allegedly threatened an incarcerated person in solitary confinement if he did not strip and masturbate for her entertainment, the ban on prison masturbation might allow prison staff to exploit incarcerated people by threatening them with false reports of masturbation (*Boxer X v. Harris*, 2006). Sexual victimization of incarcerated people is rampant and increasing, with allegations of sexual victimization increasing by 20% from 2005 to 2011, and half of those allegations by incarcerated people against guards (Beck et al., 2014). Interestingly, in prisons (as opposed to jails) most staff-on-inmate sexual violence is perpetrated by female guards against incarcerated men (Beck & Harrison, 2006). These statistics are, unfortunately, the only situations we know about because they were reported to correctional authorities. It is plausible that Boxer's case was not an isolated incident, and other incarcerated people have been similarly threatened and complied, without reporting or attempting a lawsuit. The ban on masturbation provides a unique opportunity for exploitation because unlike other wrongful behavior in prison, like drug use, violence, or theft, masturbation requires no evidence to prove, and among those in solitary confinement, does not take place in the view of many other incarcerated people who might serve as counter-witnesses.

Sex Offender Recidivism

As highlighted in the previous section on rehabilitation, banning masturbation prevents incarcerated people, especially sex offenders, from developing skills for the healthy expression of sexuality or sexual relationships (B. Smith, 2006). Rather than learning "self-control" as the ban intends, sex offenders, like other offenders, may simply learn not to masturbate while guards are watching (Vidal, 2014). It is challenging to find empirical literature on this subject with confidence in its accuracy, likely because many sex offenders may feel afraid to admit they masturbate, worrying it could lead to being punished for violating the prison rules or being dealt some other harsher penalty reserved specifically for sex offenders, like their masturbation habits being used against them in a civil commitment hearing. A similar lack of information has been reported for the general prison population (McGaughey & Tewksbury, 2002), but the concerns are probably more pronounced for sex offenders, given the sexual nature of their crimes.

Insomnia

Insomnia is a typical problem among incarcerated people in prison, which can lead to irritability, uncooperativeness, and health problems. Unfortunately, it is only partially remedied by drug treatment, assuming sleep-aid drugs are even available (Elger, 2003). Masturbation releases prolactin, a hormone heavily involved in feeling sleepy, though it releases less prolactin than intercourse (Brody & Krüger, 2006; Roky et al., 1993; Spiegel et al., 1994). Masturbation often begins in adolescence for men, as a strategy to help them sleep (Marcus & Francis, 1975). A sudden ban on that part of a typical nighttime sleep ritual might lead to insomnia, especially when first adjusting to prison, consistent with work showing that insomnia gets better over the first few weeks of entry into prison, but symptoms of insomnia remain at clinical levels, even

when given sleeping medications to combat insomnia (Elger, 2003). However, part of the causes of drug-resistant insomnia within the prison-setting might be directly the result of not being able to masturbate before sleeping, and the lack of prolactin release that results from that lack of masturbation. Thus, the prison ban on masturbation may be worsening insomnia among incarcerated people.

Stress

Many people have reported orgasms and masturbation as a subjectively stress-relieving experience (Meston & Buss, 2007; Vance & Wagner, 1976). Shortly following orgasm, blood pressure drops over the course of about ten minutes, which may explain some of the feeling of relaxation (Xue-Rui et al., 2008). Prison can be an extremely stressful experience, and incarceration-related stress is associated with serious negative health impacts (Massoglia, 2008). If the ban on prison masturbation is preventing people from engaging in an important stress-relief activity like masturbation, it is possible that the ban is increasing stress and stress-related illnesses.

Depression and Suicide

In addition to preventing aggression, lower rates of serotonin have also been strongly linked to higher rates of depression and suicide risk (Coppin & Doogan, 1988; Roy et al., 1990; Sheline et al., 1995; Stanley & Mann, 1983; Van Praag, 1981). Because masturbation can release serotonin, masturbation might help alleviate some depressive symptomatology by increasing bloodstream endorphins (Denison et al., 1999), though it does not seem to have been tested in a controlled clinical trial yet. Suicide rates are high and increasing in prisons in the United States (Palmer & Connelly, 2005). It is the leading cause of death in U.S. prisons (Suto, 2007). Masturbation may play an important protective role against depression and suicide among incarcerated people, while banning the practice might exacerbate these issues.

Solitary Confinement

Incarcerated people who are caught masturbating are frequently punished with solitary confinement in the United States, and the negative psychological effects of solitary confinement are often wrongly blamed on the incarcerated person's masturbation (B. Smith, 2006). Some incarcerated people have even reported that being in solitary confinement has destroyed their desire to masturbate, as a result of such severe sensory deprivation (Shalev, 2008). A particularly illustrative quote from an incarcerated person reports:

The lethargy of months that add up to years in a cell, alone, entwines itself about every "physical" activity of the living body and strangles it slowly to death, the horrible decay of the truly living death.... You no longer masturbate; you can call forth no vision of eroticism in any form... time descends in your cell like the lid of a coffin in which you lie and watch it as it slowly closes over you. (Abbott, 1981, p. 44)

Solitary confinement results in very serious mental and physical health consequences for incarcerated people, especially since many of the people sent to solitary confinement for

masturbating in sight of a guard have mental illnesses that also make it difficult for them to control their masturbation (Haney & Lynch, 1997; Metzner & Fellner, 2010; P. S. Smith, 2006). Because the ban on the masturbation of incarcerated people increases solitary confinement, it is may also be increasing severe mental and physical health deterioration for incarcerated people.

Alternative Policy

Given all of the harms of the ban on prison masturbation, as well as the failure of the ban to achieve its goals, this section will provide a two-prong alternative policy proposal in order to alleviate the worst effects of the ban on prison masturbation without jeopardizing the security or orderly functioning of the prison environment.

Prong 1: Allowing Incarcerated People to Masturbate Under Specific Circumstances

Allowing incarcerated people to masturbate would help potentially alleviate many of the unintended consequences brought about by the ban on prison masturbation. However, simply allowing incarcerated people to masturbate whenever they want would likely increase the experience of hostile work environments among female prison guards, as well as not teaching those with mental disabilities and sex offenders healthy ways to express sexuality. As an alternative to outright banning masturbation, allowing masturbation within specific conditions seems to be a good compromise. The easiest of these conditions to implement would be in prison settings that already afford incarcerated people spaces with a modicum of privacy. For example, in the relatively small number of prisons that already have enclosed stall doors between toilets, or enclosed shower cubicles, explicitly allowing incarcerated people to masturbate in these appropriate places is an easy way to allow prison masturbation without jeopardizing security or creating additional costs.

Alternatively, for prisons that have rooms for conjugal visits (once again, a small number of contemporary prisons), allowing those rooms to be used by incarcerated people for masturbation on a semi-regular basis (perhaps once every two weeks) would allow them to have their sexual needs met, without having to create any new security procedures or create any new facilities. Prison officials can simply employ the same security protocol they currently use for conjugal visiting.

Finally, for the majority of prisons that do not already have those options available, I would suggest allowing incarcerated people to masturbate within a very specific set of conditions, all of which must be met: (a) They must be alone in their own bed, (b) The lights in the room must be turned off, (c) It must be only be between the hours of 9 p.m. and 5 a.m., (d) The incarcerated person's genitals must be completely covered by a blanket, (e) The ejaculate must be expelled into a wad of toilet paper or tissue paper, (f) The tissue paper must be disposed of or flushed in a toilet before leaving their cell the following morning (for cells that have toilets), and (g) The incarcerated person must masturbate quietly enough to not disturb other nearby incarcerated people. These guidelines would help incarcerated people to have their sexual needs met and align with how many incarcerated men already practice masturbation but provide restrictions to protect female prison guards from being subjected to a hostile work environment as a result of an incarcerated person unintentionally masturbating in their line of sight.

Prong 2: Alternative Punishment Methods

While solitary confinement is justified in the most extreme cases, such as preventing a violent act by an incarcerated person against another incarcerated person, or isolating an incarcerated person who is severely emotionally unstable for a short period of time, it is never justified in response to a person getting caught masturbating, an act which nearly all incarcerated men engage in. Instead, alternative punishment methods should be employed for masturbating outside of the outlined guidelines, such as loss of privileges and loss of access to the canteen. These mechanisms can still be a meaningful punishment for inappropriate masturbation, especially if the incarcerated person has alternative sexual outlets that are appropriate.

Advantages of the Proposed Alternative Policy

This policy attempts to be as realistic and non-disruptive as possible, so it can be applied to a variety of prison settings without much effort. It can potentially help reduce publicly masturbating as a form of sexual harassment, and uses facilities and policies already in place, without incurring significant additional costs to the prisons. It allows incarcerated people to masturbate more frequently, comfortably, responsibly and safely, alleviating some stress, some depressive symptoms, insomnia, and potentially leading to lower rates of suicide, rape, and violence. It may even curb a small portion of the leverage that a minority of guards have used to exploit incarcerated people's fears of being punished with solitary confinement for masturbating.

Potential Objections

There are several potential objections that I anticipate to this proposal. First, some might worry that the proposal would prevent incarcerated people from developing self-control, allowing them to satisfy their sexual desires when they should otherwise be repressing them. While I think I have sufficiently demonstrated that there are greater harms to attempting to repress masturbation completely, I will assume for a moment that those arguments have not been effective. Even so, incarcerated people are still learning self-control by learning where and when it is appropriate to masturbate, especially for sex offenders and the mentally ill, who may have trouble learning those skills when masturbation is banned in all contexts.

Another objection might contend that it is unhygienic, given that semen can spread STIs. However, if the semen is ejaculated in a shower or into a toilet, then the STI risk is nonexistent, as the fluid is sent down a drain. Likewise, if it is contained in a wad of toilet paper, and then flushed, the STI risk is also non-existent, especially since tiny drops of loose semen dry quickly and dried semen poses very little transmission risk (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2011). Finally, some might be concerned that allowing incarcerated people to masturbate constitutes a security risk, as a violent incarcerated person could try to craft a weapon under a blanket while feigning that they are masturbating. However, I will contend that this is not a unique risk under the newly proposed policy. Currently, a violent incarcerated person could try to craft a weapon under a blanket and simply stop moving while a guard walks by. A similar security risk is involved in both cases, and standard prison practices to prevent incarcerated people from acquiring the materials to craft a weapon should still be followed.

Alternatively, the proposed policies might have quite different objections for prison reform and prison abolition advocates. For example, one might argue that allowing incarcerated people to masturbate under controlled circumstances will only generate another unjust mechanism of control and oppression. Instead, an alternative proposal should allow any incarcerated person to masturbate, and remove any power for correctional staff to control the incarcerated person's sexual expression. My response is that such a proposal is simultaneously unrealistic given the current attitudes Americans maintain towards incarcerated people, and inconsiderate of the female correctional staff who would otherwise be subjected to a hostile work environment.

Others might argue that prisons ought to simply ban masturbation in front of correctional staff (which is the policy in several states) and instruct incarcerated people to take care not to masturbate in their view. Similarly, one might argue that female correctional staff could be protected by simply announcing their presence before entering a cell, just as is already done for other private spaces in most prisons, such as showers. As a result, they might contend that creating specific rules around when masturbation is appropriate would be unnecessary. However, there are several advantages to constructing specific rules around when and where an incarcerated person can masturbate, as opposed to simply where and when they cannot. First, without rules about how ejaculate is to be disposed of, unhygienic semen emissions could pose a threat to the health of other incarcerated people, such as masturbating into another incarcerated person's bed, or into a blanket that is then subsequently washed by an incarcerated person working in a laundry shortly after emission. Likewise, having to announce oneself to enter into a space in which a person's cell can be seen might work for some prison environments, especially cells that have opaque doors, but would not work well for environments in which cells do not have opaque doors, or in which surveillance cameras are utilized (as opposed to direct supervision).

Others who are critical of pornography (e.g., Dworkin, 1981; MacKinnon, 1993; MacKinnon & Dworkin, 1997) might argue that allowing masturbation would lead to the legitimization of pornography use in prisons, contending that pornography use leads to harmful consequences like violence against women. This is not a position I agree with and has been criticized as needing to account for many other mediators and moderators (Malamuth & Hald, 2016) or as wholly inaccurate (Fisher & Grenier, 1994). However, even if these claims were accurate, my response would be to argue that the policy I advocate discourages pornography use. Whether it is in the shower or when the lights are off, the policies I propose make it more challenging to enjoy the use of pornography while masturbating within the confines of the policy. Thus, the policy would be unlikely to lead to a legitimization of pornography use.

Even if this alternative proposal is not convincing, states should, at the minimum, only prohibit masturbation when it is intentionally public, following the lead of the ten states who do have such policies, to avoid the worst outcomes of banning masturbation outright.

Discussion and Future Directions

The results of this systematic review indicate that most states maintain some policy that bans masturbation among incarcerated people. A review of the social science and

endocrinological research indicates that these policies may be misguided. Further, the review found that some states have not made their policies regarding the masturbation of incarcerated people publicly available at all. This is troubling. By not making inmate handbooks public it is difficult for the public to weigh in on these issues or even be aware of how incarcerated people are being treated. Regardless of whether prisons change their masturbation policies, all prisons should make this information easily available to the public. A lawyer and a Freedom of Information Act Request should not be a prerequisite to knowing the rules that govern prisons, which should supposedly be accountable to the people.

The policy proposal articulated in this article seeks to provide an alternative strategy for addressing the challenges that masturbation can pose, while also not relying on overly punitive strategies for managing it. While the primary goal of this article is to articulate a workable, realistic policy for prisons to apply to masturbation, the academic nature of this article also lends itself to recommendations for further study. There seem to be three important directions that future studies considering masturbation in U.S. prisons should consider. First, more research needs to be conducted that includes questions about masturbation, since it is the most common and nearly universal sexual practice in male prisons in the United States. Four studies over the course of 30 years simply is not enough to draw very many useful conclusions. Second, researchers should consider opportunities to partner with prisons who are being sued by female prison guards for creating a hostile work environment and are looking to settle the case out of court. Promising the plaintiffs to bring in a researcher to help better understand the problem and work toward solutions might help to strengthen the settlement and prevent similar lawsuits in the future. More importantly, such research might prevent women from being subjected to symbolic gendered violence as part of their daily work experience. Third, researchers should potentially consider building off pioneering experimental research in prisons that are allowing incarcerated people to be sexual in limited ways, such as the study of the effects of condom vending machines on reducing STI transmission rates (e.g., Sylla et al., 2010).

Conclusion

Completely banning incarcerated people from masturbating has been a misguided effort to control their sexual drives, motivated by prevailing cultural sex-negativity and largely rooted in a desire to punish incarcerated people and deprive them of pleasure. The overly punitive impulses of prison administration in the United States have been substantially criticized as an unjust form of dehumanization (Hallsworth, 2000; Weill & Haney, 2017). Instead of relying on punitive impulses, masturbation policy, like any other prison policy, should be based on the inferences and conclusions we can make from the empirical, medical, and scientific literature, and not based on political ideology or faith-based rhetoric.

Banning masturbation may lead to increased rates of violence, rape, depression, suicide, insomnia, exploitation by prison guards, solitary confinement, and stress among incarcerated people, with little to no benefit in exchange. Instead, thoughtful, responsible policies to help regulate masturbation, rather than simply banning it, should be employed by prisons to help incarcerated men handle their sexual needs appropriately.

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Contributions to Positive Sexuality from the Zen Peacemakers

Eli Pliskin
pliskin.eli@gmail.com

Abstract

Inspired by a lineage of Zen Buddhism, Zen Peacemakers provides a transformational path that integrates theory and practices, including meditation, Nonviolent Communication (NVC), the Way of Council, Bearing Witness Retreats, activism, and social enterprise. As an ordained Minister in the lineage who personally apprenticed with co-founder Bernie Glassman, I have seen these principles and practices provide great benefit. This article will highlight some of the many possible theoretical and practical points of resonance between Zen Peacemaking and the Eight Dimension Model of the Center for Positive Sexuality (CPS) (Williams, Thomas, Prior, & Walters, 2015) by suggesting how this rich and cohesive peacemaking methodology might help actualize each of the eight dimensions of positive sexuality, one dimension at a time. The eight dimensions are: (a) peacemaking, (b) multiple ways of knowing, (c) open, honest communication, (d) ethics, (e) application across all levels of social structure, (f) strengths, wellbeing, and happiness, (g) the recognition that individual sexuality is unique and multifaceted, and (h) humanization.

Introduction

This article considers sexuality as a microcosm of patterns of suffering and liberation that are recognized in the Buddhist tradition as essential to the human experience. Throughout this article, I will use the term *sexuality* to include sexual orientation, sexual desire, sexual activity, gender, and intimate relationships. While other treatments of positive sexuality (Glick, 2000; Ivanski & Kohust, 2017; Queen & Comella, 2008) share with the CPS eight-dimension model respect for sexual plurality in terms of diverse genders, sexualities, and relationship styles, this article suggests how plurality may be applied to epistemic, political, and ethical arenas as part of a transformative and liberating approach to sexuality and life.

1. Positive Sexuality Encourages Peacemaking

Each of the eight CPS dimensions may realize the Three Tenets of the Zen Peacemakers: (a) not-knowing, (b) bearing witness, and (c) doing the actions that arise from not-knowing and bearing witness. This article seeks to continue the following tradition articulated by Glassman (1998): “As a Zen teacher, I was always asking myself what new practices I could develop to help my students experience the oneness of life... And what are the peacemaking forms that will help all beings experience their interdependence?”

Linking peacemaking to the Three Tenets, Glassman (1998) inquired in *Bearing Witness: A Zen Master's Lessons in Making Peace*, “What is Peacemaking? You will not find the answer in this book. This is not a book of answers, for there is little energy in answers. This is a book of... living a questioning life, a life of unknowing. If we're ready to live such a life, without fixed ideas or answers, then we are ready to bear witness to every situation, no matter how

difficult, offensive, or painful it is. Out of that process of bearing witness the right action of making peace, of healing, arises.”

A commitment to not-knowing is compatible with understanding knowledge as tentative, incomplete, fallible, subjective, and constructed. In addition to defining not-knowing as letting go of fixed ideas, this article (following the Zen Peacemaker tradition) will use a specific sense of knowing, which involves clinging to fixed ideas, as the opposite of not-knowing. This sense of knowing is found in rigid dogma and biased assumptions. Glassman associated this type of knowing with certainty, dualism, and separation (1998).

I propose that sex negativity is knowing in the realm of sexuality. Sex negativity can take various forms. One form is the assumption that sex is bad. This bias sees sexuality as sinful, pathological, or harmful. Defined as such, other types of sex negativity assert that only particular types of sexual expression are legitimate. Heteronormativity, which is dominant in many cultures, may privilege sex for the purpose of reproduction between a husband and wife and negate all other forms of sexuality.

Examples of some signs that indicate whether or not specific cultures are sex positive or negative include the following. Conservative religion has been associated with attitudes that are not supportive of gays and lesbians (Brown & Henriquez, 2008). By defining a narrow range of sexuality as acceptable, these groups may be considered less sex positive. By contrast, participants of the BDSM sub-culture have demonstrated lower rates of sexist rape-supportive beliefs than the rest of the population (Klement et al., 2017). Researchers attribute these results to socialization in affirmative consent practices promoted by community activists. Therefore, in addition to being inclusive of practitioners of a variety of kinks, this subculture may also cultivate a more inclusive attitude with regard to gender.

Counterintuitively, the belief that sex is good could be a form of sex negativity if it involves imposing the belief that sex in general, or a particular type of sex, is good for everyone at all times. Therefore, while “slut-shaming” would be one form of sex negativity, “prude-shaming” could be another. Positive sexuality respects the lifestyles, choices, and needs of wide-ranging groups including swingers, asexuals, heterosexual spouses, those who practice celibacy, and those recovering from sexual trauma.

Forms of sex negativity and positivity vary from person to person, sometimes based on cultural patterns and, other times, individual idiosyncrasy. In contrast to sex negativity, which negates those who are deemed to fall outside of definitions of acceptability, sex positivity and peacemaking affirm and liberate. Sex negativity may result in stigma, discrimination and physical aggression, while peacemaking appreciates the wide range of diversity that naturally occurs in humanity.

2. Positive Sexuality Embraces Multiple Ways of Knowing

Viewed through the lens of the Three Tenets of the Zen Peacemakers (not-knowing, bearing witness, and taking action), the CPS dimension of embracing multiple ways of knowing is rooted in the fundamental limitations of knowing. The illusion of certain knowing creates

violence while not-knowing may contribute to peace with ourselves, with others, and with all that is. In his later years, Glassman would often paraphrase the Dude from the film *The Big Lebowski*: “that’s just your opinion” (Bridges & Glassman, 2014). Glassman said that “when we live in a state of knowing, rather than unknowing, we’re living in a fixed state of being where we cannot experience the endless unfolding of life, one thing after another... our notions of what should happen block us from seeing what actually does happen. We get upset because our expectations are not met. When we can let go of them, we are in accord with things as they arise” (Glassman, 1998).

When practicing not-knowing by avoiding clinging to any particular way of knowing, many ways of understanding and interpreting the world become possible. The CPS model encourages multiple ways of knowing in the field of sexology in terms of disciplines, theoretical paradigms, and research methods (Williams et al., 2015). Additionally, peacemaking may realize multiple ways of knowing by integrating the wisdom of the intellect with that of the heart and that of the body.

3. Positive Sexuality Promotes Open, Honest Communication

To use communication as a tool for peacemaking, sexuality involves practicing the Three Tenets of the Zen Peacemakers (not-knowing, bearing witness, and taking action) to transcend a separate sense of self in relationships. Techniques practiced in the Zen Peacemakers, including the Way of Council and Nonviolent Communication (NVC), may be applied in a variety of settings, including intimate relationships.

The Zen Peacemaker tradition may contribute to the field of sexuality because of its application of principles of meditation to interpersonal dynamics. Just like one returns to the object of attention when distracting thoughts come up during meditation, the intention of “listening from the heart” in the Way of Council involves learning how not to get hung up on judgements or rehearsing thoughts. The structure of passing a talking piece slows down the process and creates a container that can hold multiple truths side by side. The practice helps participants transcend their limited individual perspective and bear witness to the whole (Zimmerman & Coyle, 2009). The Way of Council is utilized in both Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) as well as interventions, which specifically help couples address relationship problems (Baer, 2015).

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) involves encouraging clear expression of observations, feelings, needs, and requests (Rosenberg, 2003). It recognizes subtle types of violence caused by passing off subjective judgements as objective observations. By encouraging requests instead of demands, NVC can support people to respect the autonomy and consent of others. Practicing these methods can be a powerful act of intimacy and can facilitate negotiations about sexual activity and relationship in which partners express and respond to desires and boundaries. One survey of literature finding support for the efficacy of NVC summarized that “what becomes salient in this review is an intimate interrelation among empathy enhancement, conflict resolution skills, communication skills and relationships improvement, which is consistent with previous research on empathy and pro-social behavior” (Juncadella, 2013, p. 60).

In one set of interviews, both therapists and clients identified NVC as a helpful technique for navigating polyamorous relationships in particular (Calhoun-Shepard, 2019).

4. Positive Sexuality Reflects Ethics

Viewed through the lens of peacemaking methods, all eight dimensions of positive sexuality inform lifelong practices that impact how we treat ourselves and others. Peacemaking ethics come out of bearing witness to ourselves and others in a circumstantial and situational way. Peacemaking morality is rooted in not-knowing and bearing witness while *moralism* is based on knowing. Moralism involves rigidly applying principles of right and wrong even when those principles do not promote human welfare. According to Rosenberg, the creator of Nonviolent Communication (NVC), “one kind of life-alienating communication is the use of moralistic judgements that imply wrongness or badness on the part of people who do not act in harmony with our values... blame, insults, put-downs, labels, criticism, comparisons, and diagnoses are all forms of judgement... it is a language rich with words that classify and dichotomize people and their actions” (Rosenberg, 2003). By promoting fixed ideas, these forms of language reinforce the rigid forms of knowing for which not-knowing is the antidote. Sexuality is one of the favorite targets of moralists. Advocates of the sex addiction model are one of many examples of imposing moralistic judgements on sexuality while using the language of mental health (Ley, 2012).

Positive sexuality is rooted in an intersubjective sense of morality and ethics that is sensitive to circumstance and promotes social justice. The CPS scholars argue that ethical sexual behavior be based on caution, communication, consent, and caring (Williams, Christensen, Capous-Desyllas, 2016; Williams, Thomas, Prior & Christensen, 2014). Critiquing previous approaches that emphasize a rational process of objective cognitive discernment, the CPS authors are inspired by a feminist ethic of care that sees morality situated within evolving relationships (Williams et al., 2014).

Glassman’s circumstantial approach to morality is compatible with the ethics promoted by CPS scholars. Glassman described an approach to the 10 Buddhist precepts that takes into account literal, absolute, and subjective perspectives (Glassman, 2002). From the literal standpoint, we must follow the letter of the law without exception. From the absolute standpoint, it is impossible to violate a precept because there is no fixed self to violate it (more on this later). The subjective standpoint takes into account time, place, people, and quantity.

A peacemaking sexuality ethic can include practices for continually aligning oneself more strongly with ethical conduct as well as addressing conflict and ethical breaches within communities. For example, sexuality education can foster respect for consent and the sexual rights of others (Hambrick, Grove, Warwick, & Smith, 2014). INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence have disseminated a restorative justice model for addressing sexual assault (INCITE!, 2016). Glassman encouraged regularly practicing “at-one-ment” as we understand the ways we inevitably violate precepts and seek to do better (Glassman, 2002).

5. Positive Sexuality is Applicable Across All Levels of Social Structure

Positive sexuality can be applied across what social workers call the micro, mezzo, and macro levels (Schaefer & Horesji, 2015). A resonant principle in the Zen Peacemakers is that actions that follow not-knowing and bearing witness should impact all levels of social structure. Paraphrasing Kobo Daishi, the 8th Century founder of Japan's tantric Buddhist sect, Glassman often said that "the way you could tell the depth of a person's enlightenment is by how they serve others" (Meissner, 2011). Glassman explained further that "If the depth of my... experience of the Oneness of life is the skin and bones that I call Bernie, then my focus is going to be on Bernie... If the depth of your experience of Oneness is your family, you're going to be doing things for your family... If the depth of your experience is your society, you're going to be doing works for your society... From my standpoint, it is still doing things for myself. It is just that myself *is* the society" (Meissner, 2011). The Zen Peacemakers emphasize service on all levels of society while diminishing separation between self and other through a path integrating personal development, relationships, social entrepreneurship, and activism.

Sex negativity may involve neglecting to bear witness to some social level of sexuality. It may involve an atomistic individualism that does not take into account social positions or a totalitarian collectivism that does not account for individual variation. Bearing witness to all levels of social structure should integrate personal and social transformation. The social work concept of micro, mezzo, and macro levels of practice (Schaefer & Horesji, 2015) is useful here. Positive sexuality at the micro level involves sexual self-pleasure, an individual's understanding of their own sexuality, and sexuality issues among family, friends, and sexual or intimate partners.

Two of the most salient aspects of macro level practice are government and institutional policy and social norms. Policy related to sexuality includes laws that impact sex education, marriage, sex work, and protection from discrimination for sexual minorities. While the macro level addresses organizations, communities, societies, states, nations and the whole world, the mezzo level addresses small groups, extended community, peers, and school or work and neighbors.

6. "Positive" Refers to Strengths, Wellbeing, and Happiness

Sex-negative bias can threaten our ability to bear witness to the world as it is in a number of ways. Sex negativity can take the form of excessive or exclusive focus on the negative and result in failing to appreciate strengths, resilience, and other beneficial aspects of sexuality. Another form of sex negativity is when sexual practices are inaccurately associated with pathology as a result of cultural bias that is not founded on systematic empirical observation. Related to such prejudice is when distress associated with sexual behavior is inaccurately attributed to inherent characteristics of the sexual behavior when the harm of social stigma is actually the cause of the distress. An example of such bias can be seen with understanding of sadomasochism as psychological disorder since its inclusion in Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1965), originally published in the late 19th Century. Recent research has, by contrast, revealed that sexual sadism and masochism are not associated with pathology and may be associated with various psychological benefits (Connolly, 2006; Cross and Matheson, 2006;

Hébert & Weaver, 2014; Pows & Davies, 2012; Richters, de Visser, Rissel, Grulich, & Smith, 2008; Sandnabba, Santtila, & Nordling, 1999; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013).

Glassman's use of the analogy of making a meal resonates with defining positive as strengths, wellbeing, and happiness. In *Instructions to the Cook: A Zen Master's Lessons in Living a Life that Matters* Glassman encouraged readers (Glassman & Fields, 1996) to make the best meal possible with the ingredients available. According to Glassman, looking at the positive is rooted in bearing witness to the world clearly as it is. To make the "supreme meal," he stated, it is important to let go of fixed ideas by not getting hung up on the ingredients we do not have but rather to bear witness to what is in front of us. Glassman also taught that it is important to use all the ingredients and leave nothing out. The book illustrated the application of these principles to all areas of community life through the social enterprise and service work of Glassman and his colleagues in Yonkers, NY. The Greyston Bakery in Yonkers practices the motto of making brownies to hire people instead of hiring people to make brownies. Creating products for customers including Ben & Jerry's, Greyston practices an open-hiring policy to challenge the discrimination of formerly incarcerated people.

Glassman's teaching about making the best meal possible resonates with ways that mental health and sexology leaders have sought to balance bias focusing on pathology and deficit. To focus on the positive in sexuality means increasing trust in the human capacity to pursue or not pursue fulfilling sexual experiences (Williams et al, 2015). Positive psychologists have discovered that leisure activities and relationships are more strongly correlated with Subjective Well-Being than class, income, or ethnicity (Deiner, 2000). Since sexuality is associated with leisure and relationships, sexuality is an area strongly influenced by our choice and agency, which may have a great impact on happiness. Positive psychology seeks to balance the tendency to focus on diagnosable disorders, including sexual disorders. Such an approach also provides an alternative to approaches such as Krafft-Ebing, which automatically label less common sexualities as pathological.

7. Individual Sexuality is Unique and Multifaceted

Bearing witness to the wholeness of humanity includes acknowledging, respecting, and affirming a wide range of sexual diversity while also maintaining an attitude of not-knowing with regards to individual identity. Annual Auschwitz Bearing Witness Retreats are one-way Zen Peacemakers have been exploring diversity for over two decades. On organizing the Auschwitz Bearing Witness retreat, Glassman said, "It struck me that this was a place where one answer to diversity existed and that was to kill everybody that was not like you." (Meissner, 2011). The Auschwitz retreat, by contrast, was organized to include as much diversity as possible. What would a bearing witness retreat that explored sexuality look like?

Peacemaking involves striving to appreciate and engage a wider and wider diversity of people. Gayle Rubin (1984) illustrated how a hierarchy of sexual value excludes many sexuality practices and identities. This sex negativity has a logic of its own independent from other forms of oppression. In Rubin's view, sex negativity intersects with sexism, heteronormativity, racism, classism, and other forms of oppression. Positive sexuality, therefore, may fit into an intersectional framework of working for liberation of all oppressed groups.

Respect for individuality and appreciation for fluidity are embedded in both queer theory and Buddhism. Bearing witness to the whole of humanity includes the recognition that, in the words of queer theorist Judith Butler, “No matter whether one feels one’s gendered and sexed reality to be firmly fixed or less so, every person should have the right to determine the legal and linguistic terms of their embodied lives” (Williams, 2014).

A sense of not-knowing may compliment respect for individual identity. Summarizing a foundational Buddhist principle, Glassman said, “We do not have a self or fixed identity. Because everything is changing, what actually exists is nothing” (2002, p. 42). Michel Foucault, another influential figure in queer theory, struck a similar tone when he said that “if identity is only a game... it is useful.” He went on to say that “the relationships we have to have with ourselves are not one of identity, rather, they must be relationship of differentiation, of creation, of innovation” (Gallagher, & Wilson, 1984).

8. Positive Sexuality is Humanizing

Glassman talked about the tendency to define certain people as “other.” Describing phenomena ranging from ignoring people one does not like to hate crimes and genocide, Glassman talked about the way people treat those outside of their “club.” Dehumanization is a way to define people as fundamentally outside of one’s club. By contrast, recognizing the human dignity of others, or humanization, as a form of peacemaking involves practicing the three tenets to transcend a separate sense of self in relation to social groups. Humanization involves expanding the circle of those we include in our club and eliminating the separation between those within our club and those outside of it.

Humanization takes different forms with different types of groups. One form is with identities and practices that are misunderstood and unjustly stigmatized, such as sex workers. Using inclusive language that respects diversity also reflects the dimension of respecting unique and multi-faceted individual sexuality (Williams et al., 2015).

Humanization calls us to examine how we treat people who fall short of the requirements expressed by the dimension of ethics. In addition to remembering the victims of genocide at the Auschwitz retreat, the Zen Peacemakers “remember” the German Nazi officers that ran the camp. Without forgiving or condoning, remembering acknowledges that the Nazis were human and acknowledges the “perpetrator” in each of us. Illustrating the harm of dehumanizing those who may fall short of ethical standards, Williams argued that sex-negative policy that aims to punish sex offenders dehumanizes them and ironically increases the likelihood of reoffense by making those people more isolated, depressed, and desperate (Williams, Thomas, & Prior, 2015).

It is also important to humanize those who advocate attitudes and policies that unjustly condemn or limit the sexual freedom of others. In doing so, we work to avoid othering those we experience as othering us. Promoters of sex negativity may include those who advocate for things such as conversion therapy targeting homosexuals, abstinence-only education, or media images that present a narrow range of women as attractive. By merely defining a term like “sex positivity,” we risk creating dualism with “sex negativity.” The humanizing dimension asks how we may transform sex negativity without perpetuating the violence of separation and dualism.

Conclusion

The Zen Peacemakers draw from millennia of spiritual wisdom, as well as scientifically informed approaches to mindfulness. The Zen Peacemakers philosophy informs my efforts as a social worker and sexuality educator. My experience is that the techniques of meditation, council, NVC, bearing witness retreats, and social enterprise fit together in powerful ways. Inspired by this tradition, I helped found a pay-what-you-can community café and organized a bearing witness retreat on racism in the food system. I believe that the collection of Zen Peacemaking techniques applied in conjunction with each other may offer synergistic results that help reduce suffering more effectively than if applied separately.

Whether or not the teachings of Buddhism (or any particular religion) resonate with you, this article aspires to offer you perspectives and practices that may reduce suffering for yourself and others in the field of sexuality. This article seeks to ask questions and provoke conversations. It seeks to inspire possibilities for individuals, people in intimate relationships, communities, and beyond. My hope is that further work may explore applications of peacemaking sexuality such as individual, relationship and group therapy, sexuality education, sexuality-related bearing witness retreats, and beyond.

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Extreme Sex-Negativity: An Examination of Helplessness, Hopelessness, and Misattribution of Blame Among “Incel” Multiple Homicide Offenders

D J Williams¹

Center for Positive Sexuality (USA)
Idaho State University (USA)
willdj@isu.edu

Michael Arntfield

Western University (Canada)
Murder Accountability Project (USA)

Abstract

Self-identified involuntary celibates, or “incels,” have congregated online in recent years as a way to discuss and promote a particular patriarchal and blatantly misogynist ideology that blames women, specifically, and feminist society, broadly, for the unmet sexual desires of men who feel entitled, based on gender, to sexual experiences. Thus, incel ideology is an obvious example of severe sex-negativity. While incel ideology is commonly filled with hate speech and threats of violence, there are very few, fortunately, who go on to commit extreme violence. The present study examines feelings of hopelessness and helplessness among seven incel offenders who committed or clearly attempted to commit multiple murder. Although these offenders invariably felt hopelessness and helplessness across major areas of life functioning, they grossly misattributed blame to women for their overall misery. Findings provide valuable insights into the psychology of an extreme form of sex-negativity that extends a mindset of revenge rape to pseudocommando-style mass murder.

Introduction

Positive sexuality recently has been promoted as an approach to sexuality research and practice that explicitly emphasizes strengths and wellbeing, sexual diversity, complexity of sexuality, ethics, open communication, compassion, and promoting peace (see Williams, Christensen, & Capous-Desyllas, 2016). In contrast, the Western history of sexuality research and practice reflects unrecognized sex-negative biases, where sexual behavior is viewed as inherently risky, dangerous, and problematic in various ways. In this article, we focus on an extreme form of contemporary sex-negativity, namely the recent “involuntary celibate,” or “incel,” online movement. Incel ideology, while apparently a new phenomenon born out of the internet where this movement is known to have originated and still exists almost exclusively (they are not known to have meetings or rallies in public or other offline spaces like other hate groups), represents an alloy of existing extremist ideologies. These include but are not limited to White superiority, monolithic patriarchy, antifeminism, and—most notably—the advocacy of gender-based violence in order to reestablish male power (Ging, 2019; Zimmerman, Ryan, &

¹ Acknowledgements: The authors would like to thank Kaleigh Schaal and Michelle Hillman, graduate students at Northwestern University and Idaho State University, respectively, for their valuable help with data collection for this study.

Duriesmith, 2018). Thus, core incel beliefs run directly counter to key features of positive sexuality, including diversity, ethics, compassion, and peacemaking.

Incel Beliefs and Terminology

Although a basic architecture of incel psychological characteristics has existed for some time in earlier iterations among other extant (and largely White, male-dominated) extremist groups, there has been very little research on what it is about the incel subculture and accompanying narrative that has become so recently appealing to the self-perceived disenfranchised; this includes what other deviant computing activities (the compulsive viewership of violent pornography, child pornography, online gambling, or gaming, etc.) may shape the prospective incel's disordered view of intimacy, eroticism, and females in general.

Incel ideology is steeped in misogyny and is based on the belief that feminism marks a visceral ruination of what incels perceive to be an ideal (and largely class and caste-based) patriarchal Western society; it is predicated on the basis that the chief role of females is to be the sexual property of males, and that women who rebuff even the most incompetent or inadequate of suitors, or who otherwise fail to acquiesce to this reality are involved in some kind of maladaptive confederacy and must be punished—even exterminated in some cases. The calls for an ensuing incel “revolution,” as has been published to the internet by two of the more recent and notable incel mass murderers, now forms part of a larger genocidal agenda among self-proclaimed “blackpilled” incels, or those who have adopted nihilism and fatalism, have resigned themselves to a certain virgin identity, and who have rationalized a violent gender revolt to re-establish male and White superiority (Ging, 2019; Zimmerman, Ryan, & Duriesmith, 2018).

This same blackpill narrative holds that attractive women, whom incels customarily refer to within their abstruse and coded language system as “Stacys,” have erred, both biologically and morally, in their attempts to have sexual relations with equally desirable men, known in the incel parlance as “Chads.” This sexual freedom—as a necessary corollary of modern feminism—is in turn perceived by incels as an act of heresy and disruption of the natural order, one in which (usually White and privileged) males have exclusive authority of sexual decision making. By depriving less desirable men of sexual experiences, the new order has resulted in, based on the incel mythos, segments of the male population being unable to procure the sexual partners of their choosing (Zimmerman, et al., 2018). However, there is no evidence in any of the incel mass murders committed to date that the offenders committing these vengeful atrocities had actually been rejected in their attempts at intimacy. Rather, they appear to suffer from various courtship disorders and have had highly disturbed—and very juvenile and fantastical—preconceptions about how to pursue relationships, consensual sex, and the tenets of socially acceptable forms of courtship generally (Arntfield & Danesi, 2017).

As part of a collective *ex post facto* logical fallacy that defines their groupthink, incels believe—many without having made *bona fide* attempts at courtship—that the game is somehow rigged and that they have been unfairly deprived of sexual experiences. This movement largely blames Stacys and Chads, and to some degree society at large (collectively known as “Normies”) that support increased sexual and relationship freedom and gender equality for their plight. Incels believe they are entitled to the sexual experiences they desire—often outlandish fantasies of

sexual conquest at least anecdotally appearing to be blueprinted through pornographic vignettes—but that contemporary liberal culture, impacted by feminism, has thwarted their true calling and left them instead with an involuntary celibate status—and stigma.

An early study on incelism, published nearly two decades ago, further suggested that involuntary celibacy is likely a combination of timing and both the sequencing and duration of sexual behavior (or lack thereof), and that there are three types of incels, segmented according to different relationship status (Donnelly, et al., 2001). *Virgin* incels tend to be younger (41% were between ages 18 to 24 and an additional 44% between ages 25 to 34) than the other two incel relationship types; they have also never or rarely dated as teenagers and lack social interaction skills (Donnelly, et al., 2001). *Single* incels also lack any formative relationship experience over the life course, while *partnered* incels were involved in current relationships or partnerships, but with the majority of those relationships devoid of sexual activity due to various reasons (Donnelly, et al., 2001). This latter group, for this reason, is often dismissed by other incels as false flag “volcels,” (or, voluntary celibates) in that they may be languishing in asexual relationships of convenience but are not true (typically virgin) incels.

From Hate Speech to Violent Action

What is clear from the admittedly limited data gathered at this writing is that, incels, despite their various points of overlap with other extremist mass murderers who congregate and radicalize principally in online environs, appear to have more in common with the documented typologies of rapists that have existed in the clinical and forensic literature for decades. As first postulated by Williams, Arntfield, Schaal, and Vincent (in review), recognizing the blackpill incel ideology as being more accurately paired with that of the violent sex offender versus some amorphous definition of radical or terrorist will significantly assist in not only consolidating the various and often wildly divergent tracks of scholarship on the topic but also, in a more practical sense, assist in identifying, interdicting, and perhaps even correcting incels. This is because, in large part, these rapist typologies, compared to the dearth of original research on incels, have extremely large offender samples and existing datasets for comparative analysis and the identification of common characteristics among offenders.

Further, the rise of incelism as a discernible movement naturally also raises the prospect of the sexually-motivated mass murderer (see also Murray, 2017). Of course, Holmes and Holmes (2000) previously postulated the rare category of the sexual mass murderer as part of their foundational classification system of perpetrators who target four or more victims in a single incident. They described such an individual as an offender who will murder multiple victims as part of a protracted series of sexual assaults, or incidental to those sexual assaults—such as has been documented in war crime-scenarios in the Balkans, Vietnam, the Middle East, and elsewhere in recent history amid various civil wars and insurgencies with large numbers of civilian victims. However, incel attacks are clearly motivated by not only a nexus of anger and revenge motivations as their own propaganda asserts, but also by a stated sexual motivation in all cases. In fact, the core belief of the incel movement and the tenet central to its narrative is the *deprivation* of sex, or purportedly unworthy males (Chads) controlling or otherwise having perceptively exclusive access to attractive females (Stacys)—the same females to whom incels believe they should have preferred access for sexual relations. The chief difference from the

Holmes and Holmes typology is, therefore, that there is no traditional sex act performed concomitant with the multiple murders committed by incel attackers. Yet, there is little question that sexual motive remains intact once their violent intentions (and fantasies) become operationalized.

Further, and as has been well-documented (Aggrawal, 2009; Beauregard & DeLisi, 2018; Hickey, 2016) in other cases of sexual homicide, these crimes need not be overtly sexual in their *modus operandi* to be considered sexual homicides so long as there is a sexual or paraphilic objective pursued by the offender(s) through the commission and completion of the act. If nothing else, a renewed understanding of the incel offender as sexual mass murderer marks an effective starting point for understanding incels as being foremost sex offenders, their having more points in common with extant rapist typologies than any of the four distinct “waves” of terrorism tabulated during the industrial and post-industrial ages (Rapoport, 2012).

Methods

The present investigation complements a larger study (Williams, et al., in review) that examined demographic, forensic, and cognitive features of self-described incels who had attempted or committed homicide. Findings from that study show that violent incel offenders are likely to be virginal; show characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD); use a variety of attack weapons; exhibit a strong cluster of cognitive distortions, including overgeneralizations, all-or-nothing thinking, victim stance, entitlement, power thrust, and lack of empathy. The Williams, et al. study also found that murderous incels experienced intense feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, which is the direct focus of the present study.

Study Purpose

The purpose of the present study is to identify any areas in violent incel offenders’ lives that are linked to their feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. In other words, while violent offenders seem to focus exclusively on their lack of desired sexual activity (and mistakenly blame others, especially attractive women) for their unhappiness, there would seem to be other issues that differentiate them from incels who do not commit homicide. While there appears to be a large number of incels in the online community, only a very tiny fraction, fortunately, follow through with common incel hate speech by committing violent action in the form of homicide. This difference likely is related to incel homicide offenders’ pervasive feelings of hopelessness and helplessness (see Williams et al., in review). Thus, research questions examined here include: Do incel offenders who attempt or commit multiple murder feel hopelessness and helplessness in multiple areas of their lives? If so, which areas? How do they perceive and address, or not, such sources of hopelessness and helplessness? It is one thing to feel hopeless and helpless in a single area of life functioning, but quite another to feel hopelessness and helplessness across all or most aspects of basic living.

Sample

A thorough search was conducted to identify self-identified incels who were clearly motivated to commit multiple homicide based on their incel beliefs. This search yielded seven

offenders (all male). Five offenders were American, one was Canadian, and one was British. Five offenders committed or attempted mass murder, one was apprehended prior to committing a well-planned crime, and one offender attempted to kill multiple women (one at a time via stabbing) consistent with attempted serial, rather than mass, murder. Offender ages at the time of offense ranged from 17 to 48 years, and four were in their 20s at the time of offense. About half the sample likely showed signs of ASD. Four offenders suicided at the time of their offense (murder-suicide). Regarding weapons used during offenses, four offenders killed victims with guns, two used knives in attacks, and two utilized vehicles as weapons (one offender used each type of weapon).

Data Sources and Analysis Procedure

The qualitative dataset for the Williams, et al. (in review) study was also utilized for the present investigation. Data include offenders' personal writings, videos, and social media postings; forensic documents, such as law enforcement reports and custodial interview videos; and numerous news and media reports. Materials were thoroughly reviewed, and content clearly displaying offender hopelessness and helplessness was identified and coded, based on a particular relevant area of life functioning (i.e., sex, relationship, family, friends, employment, school, etc.). Identifying the area(s) of life functioning was conducted in a flexible, emergent process, rather than *a priori*.

Results

Clear evidence of offenders experiencing strong feelings of being hopeless and helpless in multiple areas of their lives were observed across the sample. These identified areas are: (a) sexual and romantic relationships, (b) employment issues, (c) lack of friends and social interactions, and (d) family issues. However, there was no strong evidence of hopelessness or helplessness in one case. Consistent with broader incel ideology, offenders' attention was focused primarily on their lack of desired sexual activity. Offenders blamed females, generally, for a lack of sex but also for offenders' overall life misery, despite the fact that there are numerous internal and external factors that shape deficits in multiple areas of life functioning.

Sexual and Romantic Relationships

Predictably, severe emotional frustration was targeted at offenders' lack of sexual and romantic relationships. Violent incels seemed to focus on their lack of sexual experiences with much less attention devoted to frustration in other areas of their life functioning. However, although offenders commonly viewed sexual and romantic relationships as being the same based on common mononormative assumptions, clearly such relationships are not the same. Not surprisingly, offenders blatantly objectified women when discussing both lack of desired romance and lack of sex, focusing substantially on attractive physical characteristics. A particularly violent offender who survived his murderous "mission" told police that he "wanted to convert the life status of certain individuals to death status," while later explaining that the incel phenomenon is "basically a movement of angry incels such as myself who are unable to get laid." While offenders blame females specifically, the movement also puts some blame on society more broadly for the "virginity burden" that is supposedly placed on incel men. Just as

positive sexuality applies across all levels of social structure, so too, does the impact of extreme sex-negativity across micro, mezzo, and macro societal levels (see Williams, et al., 2016).

When offenders acknowledged severe frustration in other areas of life functioning, they blamed women (via frustration from not having desired sexual and relationships) for these problems. One offender left a note at the time of his massacre, part of which read, “If I cannot find one decent female to live with, I will find many indecent females to die with. If they are intent on denying me life, I will have no choice, but to deny them life.” Diarizing from another offender illustrates the common shifting of blame toward women for broader problems that men without a female partner experience. He wrote, “A man needs a woman for confidence. He gets a boost on the job, career, with other men, and everywhere else when he knows inside he has someone to spend the night with who is also a friend.” In other words, he believes a female partner is largely responsible for any success, or perhaps lack thereof, in other areas of his life. A few months later, this offender shot and killed three women while injuring nine more. In angrily blaming women for the sum of his problems, another violent offender who had carefully planned a mass murder at a women’s march admitted:

I have never had a girlfriend before and I’m still a virgin, this is why I am planning on shooting up a public place soon and being the next mass shooter... I’m ready to die and all the girls that turned me down is going to make it right by killing as many girls as I see.

A younger offender in the sample reported, “I think every girl is a type of shit; they are fussy with men nowadays and do not give boys like us a chance. I am still a virgin; everyone is losing it (virginity) before me, that’s why you (females) are my chosen target.” Across the sample, violent offenders blamed women for not having sex with them, not choosing them as romantic partners, and subsequently for overall lack of success in other areas of the offenders’ lives.

Employment Issues

The inability to find and maintain employment was common in the majority of offender cases. One offender admitted frustration “when jobs turn you down,” yet he blamed women for his overall unhappiness. Another offender lost multiple jobs early in his adult life due to inappropriately touching women, which resulted in denial of employment applications 55 times prior to his shooting and killing two women and injuring four others. His writings declared, “If I cannot make a living, I will make a killing.” Before killing 10 people (excluding himself) and injuring 8 more, one offender wrote that he “had no job, no life, no successes,” but had very little to say about these areas in comparison to his frustration and blame toward women. One offender apparently had a good job and liked his coworkers, but anticipated he would be let go in the near future based on budget cuts and company downsizing.

A recent study examining characteristics of mass public shootings, which is applicable to six of the seven offenders in this sample (albeit one of the six used a vehicle as the sole weapon in his public massacre), identified specific features of different types of mass public shooting offenders—disgruntled employees, school shooters, ideologically motivated, and rampage shooters (do not fit one of the other types) (Capellan, Johnson, Porter, & Martin, 2019). While

incel mass murderers are motivated by a unique ideology rooted in sex-negativity, which is different than other ideological motivated mass shooters (i.e., political and religious-based), several offenders in the current sample experienced such severe employment problems that perhaps it is a little surprising that they did not seriously consider bifurcation at a workplace setting as part of their attacks. The reason they did not do so seems to be that they focused blame on females for all of their problems, employment issues included.

Lack of Friends / Social Relationships

Across the sample, violent incel offenders expressed hopelessness and helplessness linked to multiple reports that they had very few, if any, friends and meaningful social relationships. From a positive sexuality approach, a chronic pattern of severe lack of open and honest communication and humanization were noted both toward and from incel homicide offenders in their social interactions. Such unfulfilling or disturbing interactions may eventually contribute to finding and accepting violent incel ideology. The youngest offender in the sample reported he “has a hard time making friends and is often lonely,” then added, “I am always being bullied for being unintelligent.” In a state of reflection, another offender wrote, “I had no friends, no girlfriend, was all alone.” Forensic records indicate that one offender had very few, if any, close contacts and valuable social interactions. This offender had telephoned a rare “friend,” who had moved thousands of miles away, 831 times in a relatively short time span, and the individual eventually had to block the offender’s phone number.

Previous research found that violent incel murderers are either self-deprecating or grandiose regarding their self-perceptions (Williams, et al., in review). An extremely grandiose and narcissistic offender, while generally blaming women and lack of sex for his unhappiness, alienated potential friends and eroded his social relationships based on his expectations of having unlimited power and social capital. At one point he lamented that he had “No friends, no girls, no life,” and later wrote:

As time progressed, I realized how hopeless everything in my life was. The chances that I will ever rise to power and right the wrongs of the world are extremely slim. I had absolutely no idea or plan of how to acquire any sort of power. It was naïve of me to think that someday I could be a dictator. The only thing I could do was fantasize about it. My whole world twisted even deeper into darkness and despair as my depressing life continued on. My hatred for people who have sex festered inside me like a plague.

This grandiose offender fully believed that he was better than other people; that he was entitled to the sex and power that he desired; and a large part of his hopelessness and helplessness stemmed from his intense jealousy (and eventual hatred) of others that subsequently led to his own social isolation and loneliness.

Family Problems

Although rarely mentioning family specifically, several offenders in the sample expressed feeling severely lonely overall, using terms such as “all alone” and “alone and unknown.” One offender summarized, “My whole life has been one lonely enterprise.” Based on

the available data, it appears almost none of the offenders experienced particularly close emotional relationships with their families, while some briefly spoke of, or alluded to, particular problems. One offender wrote, “My dad never (not once) talked to me or asked about life’s details and tell me what he knew. He was just a useless sperm donor.” Data pertaining to another offender showed his lack of connection to family, but also broader family conflict and lack of open family communication as a whole.

A grandiose offender in the sample, somewhat of an anomaly, did turn to his parents when feeling hopeless and helpless but also felt like he let them down by not being good enough compared to others:

Feeling the need to talk to someone, I called the only people I had in my life: my parents. I called them both, first my mother and then my father, and told them how much I was suffering from my loneliness, and my utter realization that that I had no hope of ever living a happy life. I told them they must be ashamed of me, that I was a 21 year old virgin who is unable to get a girlfriend or making friends whatsoever. I was not the son any parent would want. My tantrum on the phone deeply disturbed them, and they arranged for me to see my psychiatrist.

In the end, this particular offender’s insatiable need for power, sex, and attention led to murder-suicide where several innocent people lost their lives. Overall, while various family issues were noted in connection with feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, this area of functioning was least salient from the available data, compared to romantic and sexual relationships, employment issues, and lack of friends and meaningful social relationships.

Discussion and Conclusion

Incel multiple homicide offenders clearly display an extreme form of sex-negativity, wherein they seem to believe that as White males, they are entitled to the sexual and romantic relationships that they desire. Although their diatribes are directed at females and a lack of sexual and romantic experiences, this study illustrates that their feelings of helplessness and hopelessness are connected, consciously or not, to other areas in their lives, specifically employment issues, lack of friends and broader social relationships, and in some cases family issues. Previous research has found that incel homicide offenders display a particular cluster of various cognitive distortions and neutralizations, including overgeneralization, entitlement, all-or-nothing thinking, victim stance, lack of empathy (and denial of victim), and power thrust (Williams, et al., in review).

It appears that homicidal incels’ intense feelings of helplessness and hopelessness in multiple areas of functioning, continually fueled by rigid patterns of cognitive distortions, may drive subsequent thoughts and plans for homicidal expressions of power and revenge. Thus, motivations of power and revenge are the progressive link from a psychology of anger-retaliatory rapist or vindictive rapist to sexualized mass murder. Indeed, two of the primary motivators of different types of mass murder are power and revenge (Fox & DeLateur, 2014). In other words, incel homicide offenders, seeking ultimate power and revenge, simply bypass rape, committing sexualized mass murder instead (also see Murray, 2017). Although mass murder

motivated by incel ideology seems to be its own unique type of crime, it is consistent with the pseudocommando style mass murderer (Knoll, 2010), while also reflecting some, though not all, elements of ideologically motivated mass public shootings (Capellan, et al., 2019). Incels feeling extreme helplessness and hopelessness in multiple areas of life functioning crave ultimate power and revenge via mass murder, not rape. Consistent with various forms of mass public violence, incel violent offenders seem to struggle with body perception issues, psychological distress, and significant losses, while then seeking to overcompensate via hypermasculinity based on their perceptions of a damaged self (Langman, 2020).

It should be obvious that incel ideology, let alone incels motivated to commit multiple murder, is an extreme and blatant form of sex-negativity and anti-feminism. A positive sexuality approach emphasizes personal strengths, wellbeing, and happiness; embraces sexual diversity; welcomes multiple perspectives; applies core ethical principles to sexuality; incorporates compassion through humanizing and peaceful solutions; and applies across multiple levels of social structure (Williams, et al., 2016). Overall, these dimensions of positive sexuality seem to be notably absent in incel ideology generally and among incel homicide offenders specifically. Incel homicide offenders seem to share common features at the micro (individual) level (severely distorted cognitive patterns; rigid thinking; potential ASD; inaccurate self-perceptions), mezzo level (few friends and social relationships), and macro level (employment problems; sexual and relationship illiteracy; online interactions that support sex-negativity and violence). As an incel's feelings of hopelessness and helplessness increase, it would seem that the risk for committing extreme violence also increases. While more research on understanding and preventing incel violence is needed, the widespread education and promotion of positive sexuality principles would seem to help, over time, in mitigating multiple risk factors for such extreme violence fueled by sex-negativity.

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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:

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- 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.

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- 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
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