

Negotiating opposition to positive sexuality research, practice, and education: Insights from personal reflection

DJ Williams, Ph. D.¹

Idaho State University and the Center for Positive Sexuality
willdj@isu.edu

Abstract

In this essay, I reflect on my academic career to share insights on dealing with challenges arising from specializing in positive sexuality. The current American bimodal political climate, a focus on consumerism in higher education, and an undervaluing of actual expertise are important contemporary social contexts that should be realized when anticipating opposition to positive sexuality research, practice, and education. Positive sexuality researchers, practitioners, and educators are encouraged to anticipate opposition, build strong support networks, apply rigor to their work, focus on common societal values, and prioritize their personal self-care.

Introduction

Western society has a long, largely unrecognized history of cultural sex-negativity. Despite recognition by social scientists and anthropologists that sexual norms vary considerably by culture (e.g., Bughra et al., 2010; Bullough, 1976; Popovic, 2006), many scholars, professionals, and laypeople remain unaware that much common sexual knowledge, scientific and otherwise, remains situated within broad sex-negative assumptions. The good news is that more academics and professionals are becoming increasingly aware of common sex-negative assumptions. Unfortunately, widespread social change usually occurs much more slowly than many of us would prefer.

In this brief personal essay, I reflect on opposition to positive sexuality research and education, drawing on my own personal experience in academia, along with numerous relevant observations and interactions with fellow positive sexuality experts. My hope is that insights shared here may be valuable for young academics, clinicians, and educators who are passionate about positive sexuality and who plan to develop a career centered on this topic. Because an awareness of positive sexuality, conceptualized in various ways, seems to be growing rapidly and now has a certain amount of momentum and perceived academic and professional legitimacy, the future appears to be bright for young academics and professionals who turn their careers toward this topic. However, at the same time, whenever commonly held assumptions are substantially questioned or challenged, including but not limited to those around sexual behavior, then we should expect to face a considerable amount of opposition and resistance.

Although I strongly believe that positive sexuality has a bright future, it is important to remember that opposition to change seems to happen most intensely as momentum supporting

¹ Acknowledgements: The author expresses gratitude to the many individuals who engage in positive sexuality research, practice, and education. A career in positive sexuality is rewarding but not always easy. Special thanks is extended to those who have offered support to the author, personally, throughout particularly challenging times.

new ways of thinking builds, thus gaining traction within the mainstream. Also, current societal conditions further complicate the specific nature of contemporary opposition to positive sexuality research and education—specifically, the polarization of American politics; the functional shift in higher education to a consumer model; and the common failure to understand epistemological differences, and thus outcomes, related to research methods and knowledge production. As Nichols (2017) recently documented, there is widespread ignorance of, and worse, disregard for, formal expertise. In other words, there is a large percentage of the population that does not understand research processes and how to evaluate critically various types and sources of information (Nichols, 2017).

Politically, there seems to be a battle, unfortunately, between American extremes (right vs. left) on a wide range of social issues; thus, moderates seem to be drawn increasingly toward one side or the other. However, opposition to positive sexuality potentially can arise from anywhere on the conservative-liberal continuum, and “fighting battles,” in contrast to peacemaking, is the current norm (Williams et al., 2019). Also, higher education has changed dramatically in recent decades and has adopted a consumer model (Nichols, 2017); thus students (as paying consumers) seem to have more political power within educational institutions than ever before. Finally, postmodern and poststructural theoretical orientations, which emerged as an important methodological critique of positivist science as the only legitimate method of inquiry (Gergen, 2001), have instead functioned for many as a replacement for rigorous scientific process and has given rise, unfortunately, to an all-too-common attitude that any opinion is just as valid as any other opinion. Such a simple irrational attitude not only lacks sophistication, but it can lead to dangerous outcomes. Of course, while diverse rigorous methods for obtaining knowledge have value, some research methods are much better suited to answer particular questions, while other methods can help answer different questions. While it is beyond the focus of this paper to delve into the above issues in depth, suffice it to say that the above issues within the current social and political world seem to shape, at least in some substantial part, opposition to positive sexuality research and education.

Reflecting on an Academic Career: Insights for Navigating Opposition

When I began my Ph.D. studies two decades ago, much of my research program focused on sexual crime. I quickly discovered that while an accumulating body of scientific research on sexual offending issues moved in one direction, sexual offending policy had quickly progressed in the opposite direction. It has been well documented that contemporary U.S. sexual offender policy is based almost entirely on myths and moral panic, not science and research (Quinn et al., 2004; Williams et al., 2015a). As I became familiar with the research literature on sexual behavior more broadly, I further discovered that common attitudes on other sexuality topics, such as sex education, alternative sexual identities, and sex work, were also rooted in myths rather than actual research and scholarship. As a doctoral student, I discovered that learning about sexual behavior was fascinating. After reading study after study, I became more uncomfortable with the everyday injustices that occur directly due to mismatches between rigorous sexuality research and common social attitudes rooted in sex-negative myths. Dominant social discourses in western culture have produced largely unchallenged assumptions about sexual behavior and subsequently exerted increased political control over those who engaged in supposedly “deviant” behavior, yet an accumulating body of scholarship continues to challenge

such assumptions. A combination of (a) the biopsychosocial complexity of sexual behavior and (b) the everyday social injustice due to mismatches between research and practice sparked a new research interest, consensual bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadomasochism (BDSM) that has spanned my entire academic career from Ph.D. student to full professor.

“Follow Your Bliss”—Carefully!

While conducting initial research, as a participant, on (BDSM) as a postdoctoral fellow, I was warned by a thoughtful professor to carefully consider the problems that may arise simply by researching alternative sexuality topics. Researching alternative sexuality and BDSM might be “career suicide,” she had wisely explained. She stated that higher education is not as open as many people think and that researching taboo topics brings intense stigma, including by academic colleagues. This observation has been documented over the years by several sex researchers (i.e., Attwood, 2010; Hammond & Kingston, 2014; Israel, 2002; Thomas & Williams, 2016). Early scholars studying BDSM faced significant stigma by academic institutions and colleagues due to their chosen topic (Jobson, 2020; Weinberg, 2020). Decades later, federal granting agencies in the U.S. are not yet willing to fund positive sexuality research; thus, faculty positions at research universities where securing federal funding is a tenure requirement may not be the best fit for young positive sexuality scholars.

However, after carefully considering the likelihood that some career opportunities would not be available due to researching taboo topics - including BDSM and alternative sexuality - I remained fascinated with trying to understand diverse sexual behavior. I personally felt strongly that both common social attitudes and policy should be based primarily on sound research and scholarly analysis, not historical myths and popular opinion. I decided that following my research passion, as numerous other brave scholars in the field of human sexuality have done, was the right course for me. I feel fortunate that my professors in graduate school were encouraging and supportive while also acknowledging and advising me to be prepared for potential problems that might arise simply due to my choice of research topics.

Anticipate Opposition

In 2006, I accepted a tenure-track faculty position. As a new assistant professor, I reached out by email to two senior professors at other institutions who had enjoyed very successful careers focused on understanding diverse sexual behavior. I asked for any advice they would be willing to share regarding starting an academic career and, hopefully, my following in their large footsteps. Both were very supportive and shared excellent advice, including a clear warning that strong opposition inevitably would come—in other words, it was not a matter of if, but when. They emphasized the importance of expecting opposition and being prepared for it. Both had observed that it is impossible to keep everybody happy when conducting research on human sexuality and other sensitive topics. These two wise scholars, who both had received prestigious awards for their teaching and research, had faced fierce opposition in their own careers. One dealt with systemic public outcry for him to be fired, and he was sent numerous death threats by anonymous people who apparently were not pleased with his topics of expertise.

For the first five years or so following my entrance into academia as a faculty member, things went reasonably smoothly. I heard about various gossip about me that apparently circulated within the conservative regional area where my university is located. I expected gossip, of course, but did not think too much of it. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, on a sunny spring morning in 2011, I was instructed to report to my dean's office immediately for an emergency meeting. Present at the meeting were the dean, associate dean, department chair, and me. Apparently, a powerful state senator was not pleased about my expertise on sexuality and had called the university administration demanding that I be fired. I was accused of conducting a "salacious" and "inappropriate" teaching activity during an upper division/graduate level criminology class. The supposedly intolerable class activity, as part of a module on sexual offender supervision, focused on dealing therapeutically with offenders' sexual fantasies in treatment and involved students anonymously creating a sexual fantasy while also being able to read such material written by others in a professional, matter-of-fact manner—just as a therapist or law enforcement officer would do in a clinical or legal setting. This educational activity is important preparation for developing professional competence to work with sexual offenders. In the end, all my syllabi, course materials, and class evaluations were reviewed and thoroughly scrutinized. I provided additional material to support my scholarship on sexual behavior, including copies of emails with advice from the two senior sexuality scholars that I had reached out to when I began my career. My preparation was essential in me keeping my job.

Apparently, I was watched very closely for several years by those who continually sought my job termination. These years were stressful, to say the least. Fortunately, I had outstanding support from my dean, associate dean, and numerous internal and external colleagues. I was still able to achieve tenure and promotion to associate professor on time, as well as a recent promotion to full professor by a new university administration. Although I withstood administrative scrutiny and continued to succeed academically, I was not as prepared as I should have been for that experience and the emotional toll that it has taken. I still refuse to use an office phone due to post-traumatic reaction from seeing that a threatening message may be waiting. Thankfully, the current administration is far more supportive and protective of academic freedom than the previous one. I still cannot help but be cautious, however.

Network and Build Support

Due to both stigma and the likelihood of opposition to positive sexuality education and research, it is important for those pursuing a career in positive sexuality to connect with other scholars and professionals, both within and outside of one's academic institution, if possible, who do similar work. In other words, both internal and external academic support is needed. I started to network early in my career but would have benefited from additional mentoring and career support. Connecting with supportive positive sexuality colleagues can be extremely valuable, of course, in dealing with both blatant and also more subtle forms of opposition that may arise. It also may be wise to connect with campus programs (and faculty) that focus on diversity resources, LGBT studies, and social justice. Strong mutual support offers strength and protection that may be needed should significant opposition arise. Furthermore, strong professional networks help sustain motivation over time while reminding us that although our work may be difficult, it remains important and valuable.

Several nonprofit organizations do outstanding professional work related to positive sexuality, including the Center for Positive Sexuality (CPS), National Coalition for Sexual Freedom (NCSF), Community-Academic Consortium for Research on Alternative Sexualities (CARAS), The Alternative Sexuality Health Research Alliance (TASHRA), and the Woodhull Freedom Foundation (WFF). These organizations often work together and support each other while providing opportunities for various professionals to obtain more knowledge, skill, and support. Not surprisingly, several leaders in these organizations have experience successfully navigating various experiences of opposition to positive sexuality.

Emphasize Professional Ethics and Common Social Values

Opposition to positive sexuality typically is rooted in common sex-negative attitudes about specific sexual behaviors (and people who engage in such behaviors). However, when defending positive sexuality research and education, it may be particularly beneficial to focus primarily on professional ethics and common social values. Formal codes of ethics across the helping professions (i.e., counseling, medicine, nursing, psychology, social work, etc.) explicitly promote client self-determination, human diversity, cultural sensitivity (including an awareness of one's own biases), and social justice. The helping professions also emphasize the importance of research-informed practice. Positive sexuality, of course, should reflect these same basic ethical principles (Williams et al, 2015b). Negotiating opposition, then, may be more successful by gently addressing standard ethical issues relevant to human diversity, social justice, cultural bias, and so forth, rather than defending topics—including specific behaviors, subcultures, communities, or assumed outcomes. Depending on the opposition, it can also be helpful to mention, as examples, more familiar historical movements around human rights where false assumptions once reigned but substantial progress has since been achieved. In other words, the process of stereotyping, marginalizing, and discriminating against a particular group of people is generally the same. Various individuals and communities, now assimilated into the mainstream, have been (mis)labeled historically as “dangerous” and/or “deviant” until much more knowledge became available.

Apply Rigor

Critics of positive sexuality issues often seem to focus on restricting professional work (i.e., research, teaching, practice) dealing with taboo topics. In addition to emphasizing ethics, researchers, practitioners, and educators should also highlight that scholarly rigor is present in their work. Researchers should strive to conduct methodologically sound investigations, acknowledge limitations, and not overstate or overgeneralize findings. The work of educators and practitioners should be rooted in current, relevant scholarship that can highlight the potential contributions of a positive sexuality approach. Rigor also should be applied to critique various studies, theories, and common assumptions about all sorts of sexuality topics. When considering the application of “evidence” to one's academic and professional work, it is worth remembering that evidence can be scientific, historical, and cultural, though each of these types of evidence has limitations. My experience has been that professional engagement in positive sexuality topics is not difficult to defend when discussions focus on ethics and scholarly rigor.

Create a Self-Care Plan—and Follow it!

A career in positive sexuality, whether as an academic or other professional, can be rewarding but also stressful, especially when the potential for encountering negative appraisal from others is likely. It is valuable, then, to create and follow a basic self-care plan. Incidentally, the need for regular self-care among practitioners across the helping professions continues to be recognized—so much so that the American Nurses Association (ANA, 2015) explicitly included self-care in the latest edition of its Code of Ethics. Under Provision 5.2: Promotion of Personal Health, Safety, and Well-Being; nursing professionals “should eat a healthy diet, exercise, get sufficient rest, maintain family and personal relationships, engage in adequate leisure and recreational activities, and attend to spiritual or religious needs” (ANA, p. 35).

For many professionals, practicing regular self-care is quite difficult due to occupational time demands. Of course, some positive sexuality scholars and professionals participate in BDSM or fetish activities as a part of their self-care, and the decision to out oneself or not should be well thought out (Williams et al., 2021). However, all academics and professionals should have the right to self-determination in their private lives, just like everyone else, so long as formal laws and professional ethical requirements are followed. Wisdom should be applied, of course, but personal preferences to engage in positive sexuality activities should be defensible according to relevant research and professional ethics.

Reflecting on my own career, I have been quite successful at setting boundaries around professional demands in order to nurture self-care and sustain some degree of life balance. Although I initially underestimated the intensity of opposition I would encounter, my consistent, basic self-care probably got me through the incredibly stressful experience of facing serious threats to my job. Today, I insist that students I supervise create and follow a basic self-care plan, which includes salubrious recreation and leisure activities, whatever these may be, during personal time.

Conclusion

The positive sexuality movement is growing rapidly worldwide, thus producing new ways to approach research, education, and professional practice. Communities of specialized positive sexuality practitioners also collaborate with scholars and professionals (such as CARAS) to share knowledge and provide mutual support. However, while this rapid growth is exciting, it also can result in sometimes fierce opposition by various individuals, communities, and institutions that reflect attitudes and assumptions still thoroughly immersed in sex-negativity. Thus, there remains a strong need for positive sexuality researchers and professionals to be prepared to encounter professional marginalization and intense political opposition. In contemporary American society, there seems to be political polarization rooted in ubiquitous war-making, a widespread consumer-driven approach to higher education, and a lack of general literacy regarding understanding and critiquing knowledge production and application (see Nichols, 2017). In contrast to common political strategies of fighting various wars and weaponizing opposing beliefs, I believe positive sexuality should reflect peacemaking as much as possible, yet peacemaking sometimes requires defense against attacks (Williams et al., 2019). The crux of this paper is about insights that may be useful for positive sexuality researchers, educators, and practitioners to defend against potential opposition.

I believe it is important for young academics and professionals to follow their bliss (carefully) despite potential career difficulties—but to be sufficiently prepared by anticipating opposition, networking and building professional support, emphasizing ethics and rigor, and consistently following a self-care plan. I have learned that while an awareness of potential opposition is obvious, it is easy to become complacent and subsequently underestimate the psychological difficulty of having to deal with such an experience. I am now at a point in my career, as a full professor with tenure, to speak more openly about professional experiences that have significantly impacted me, personally, and vice-versa (see also Williams et al., 2021). I have been fortunate to have received strong support from many colleagues and friends through difficult times. Upon reflection, I am still pleased that I made the career choices that I did. I continue to applaud the pioneers of positive sexuality—many of whose work I drew from in building much of my career—for their courage, perseverance, and commitment to work that has produced numerous benefits to both current and future generations.

References

- American Nurses Association. (2015). *Code of ethics*. Silver Spring, MD: Author.
- Attwood, F. (2010). Dirty work: Researching women and sexual representation. In R. Ryan-Flood & R. Gill (Eds.), *Secrecy and silence in the research process* (pp. 177-187). New York: Routledge.
- Bughra, D., Popelyuk, D. & McMullen, I. (2010). Paraphilias across cultures: Contexts and controversies. *Journal of Sex Research, 47*, 242-256. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224491003699833>
- Bullough, V. L. (1976). *Sexual variance in society and history*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Gergen, K. J. (2001). Psychological science in a postmodern context. *American Psychologist, 56*, 803-813. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-0066X.56.10.803>
- Hammond, N., & Kingston, S. (2014). Experiencing stigma as sex work researchers in professional and personal lives. *Sexualities, 17*, 329-347. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460713516333>
- Israel, T. (2002). Studying sexuality: Strategies for surviving stigma. *Feminism and Psychology, 12*, 256-260. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353502012002013>
- Jobson, R. (2020). The persistent pathologization of BDSM: An interview with Charles Moser. *Sexualities* (online first). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460720961296>
- Nichols, T. (2017). *The death of expertise: The campaign against established knowledge and why it matters*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Popovic, M. (2006). Psychosexual diversity as the best representation of human normality across cultures. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy, 21*, 171-186. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681990500358469>
- Quinn, J. F., Forsyth, C., J., & Mullen-Quinn, C. (2004). Societal reaction to sex offenders: A review of the origins and results of myths surrounding their crimes and treatment amenability. *Deviant Behavior, 25*, 215-232. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639620490431147>
- Thomas, J. N., & Williams, D J. (2016). Getting off on sex research: A methodological commentary on the sexual desires of sex researchers. *Sexualities, 19*, 83-97. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460715583610>
- Weinberg, T. S. (2020). The beginning of the sociological study of BDSM: A personal reflection. *Sexualities* (online first). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460720961288>
- Williams, D J, Coto, L., & Streaun, W. B. (2019). Insights on conscientious peacemaking as a dimension of positive sexuality. *Journal of Positive Sexuality, 5*(2), 25-33. <https://doi.org/10.51681/1.521>
- Williams, D J, Prior, E. E., & Thomas, J. N. (2021). Playing with danger: Encouraging research on BDSM as a form of leisure via reflection and confession. In D.C. Parry & C.W. Johnson (Eds.), *Sex and leisure: Promiscuous perspectives* (pp. 38-54). New York: Routledge.
- Williams, D J, Thomas, J. N., & Prior, E. E. (2015a). Moving full-speed ahead in the wrong direction? A critical examination of U.S. sex-offender policy from a positive sexuality model. *Critical Criminology, 23*, 277-294. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10612-015-9270-y>
- Williams, D J, Thomas, J. N., Prior, E. E., & Walters, W. (2015b). Introducing a multidisciplinary framework of positive sexuality. *Journal of Positive Sexuality, 1*(1), 6-11. <https://doi.org/10.51681/1.112>