

Insights on Conscientious Peacemaking as a Dimension of Positive Sexuality

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Abstract

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

Introduction

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

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

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

Attributes and Process of Peacemaking

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

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

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

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

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

Toward the Application of Peacemaking to Sex Topics: Some Examples

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

Sexual Identity Politics

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

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

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

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

Sex Education

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

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

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

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

Diverse Sexual Interests and Practices

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

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

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

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

Sexual Crime and Violence

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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