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#HotGirlScience: A Liberatory Paradigm for Intersectional Sex-Positive Scholarship

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Abstract

What if being a hot girl was a way of life and a way of conducting science? In this paper, we propose a new sex-positive, liberatory, intersectional paradigm for sex science, #HotGirlScience. The #HotGirlScience paradigm invites sexologists to study the fun, sex-positive aspects of Black sexualities and move toward liberation-focused inquiry where pleasure is central. #HotGirlScience is founded upon hip hop feminism, hood feminism, and the work of Black feminist scholars past and present. The #HotGirlScience paradigm differs from the previously-mentioned feminisms in its empirical potential. Four criteria of real #HotGirlScience apply to the entire research process and not just interpretation of results or theoretical foundations of the research. By explaining the four criteria: 1) doing me unapologetically, 2) having fun, 3) sex positivity, and 4) hyping up my friends, we present the #HotGirlScience paradigm's ability to inform the empirical study of the pleasurable, sex-positive aspects of Black sexual lives as a necessary contribution to the current sexology canon that all too frequently presents a deficit view of Black sexualities. Descriptions of the four elements of the paradigm, as well as implications for the use of this paradigm with marginalized populations in sex science, are discussed.

Introduction

Although hip hop artist Megan Thee Stallion revitalized the phrase “hot girl” in the summer of 2019 (Megan Thee Stallion, 2019), the phrase’s history as a hip hop lifestyle began twenty years earlier. When the Hot Boys, a rap group under the Cash Money label, introduced “I Need a Hot Girl” in 1999 (Hot Boys, 1999), their description of the hot girl prototype provided a framework for Megan’s rap persona, in that she was a sexually liberal, Southern, hood girl (i.e., from the housing projects or adjacent economically marginalized areas, reflective of Black, socioeconomically marginalized cultural norms, strengths, and stereotypes). The hot girl identity has stood the test of time by existing in theory and action for at least two decades, anchoring the co-authors’ formative years, as well as a new generation of hot girls. Jennings (2020) asserts that #HotGirlSummer is an epistemology, or how we know something (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). In this paper, we extend Jennings’ (2020) assertion by integrating Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000), hood feminism (Kendall, 2020), and hip hop feminism’s invitation to a politics of

¹ Acknowledgements: To the hot girls of our generation and generations past and present, thank you for making sex positivity our purpose.

pleasure (Morgan, 2015). We suggest #HotGirlScience is an emerging paradigm: a worldview that guides research action (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Ponterotto, 2005).

#HotGirlScience is a paradigm located within a liberatory philosophy of science, which is the next step following critical philosophies of science. Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) identify four preceding paradigms (e.g., positivist, interpretivist, critical, pragmatic), and Ponterotto (2005) also delineates four somewhat different paradigms (e.g., positivist, postpositivist, constructivist-interpretivist, critical-ideological). These scholars suggest the critical or critical-ideological paradigm intends to lead to emancipation/liberation of marginalized people; however, in practice the critical paradigms have often stopped at explicating oppressive power dynamics with suggestions for liberated action, rather than doing research on the positive, liberated aspects of marginalized people's lives. Thus, we distinguish liberation philosophies of science from critical, especially as it relates to sexology.

To this end, the #HotGirlScience paradigm invites sexologists to study the fun, “messy, sticky, and joyous” (Morgan, 2015, p. 39) sex-positive aspects of Black sexual lives as a necessary contribution to the current sexology canon that all too frequently presents a deficit view of Black sexualities. Sexologists studying Black people are encouraged to read critical sexuality studies to reduce their ignorance (Bowleg et al., 2017; Lassiter et al., 2021), but move beyond them toward sex-positive, liberation-focused inquiry (Hargons et al., 2020), where pleasure is central (Thorpe et al., 2021; 2022). In this paper, we outline the criteria by which one can determine if they are conducting real #HotGirlScience, and we establish this paradigm's four elements: epistemology, ontology, methodology, and axiology (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). First, we provide an overview of the Black feminist frameworks that undergird #HotGirlScience.

Black Women's Multifaceted Feminisms and Sex Research

Black feminisms are multifaceted, often in conversation with Black feminists of the preceding generation, global and other racially marginalized feminists, and White feminists. In the national context of the United States of America, early Black feminists undertook the work of respectability politics as a vehicle for safety from racist and sexist violence (Harris-Perry, 2011), as well as seeking suffrage and the ability to be treated like “ladies” (Thompson, 2009; Winfrey-Harris, 2015). The work of Black feminists and womanists like Collins (2000; 2004), hooks (2000), Crenshaw (1991), Lorde (1984), and Butts (1977) provided an analysis and taxonomy for understanding the intersecting marginalization Black people faced (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism) and the myriad resources and strengths Black people possessed and used to confront them. For example, Collins (2000, 2004) gave us the language of controlling images, Black sexual politics, and defining ourselves, alongside Crenshaw's (1991) contribution of the intersectionality framework and hooks' (2000) love ethic. Lorde (1984) and Butts (1977) presented us with the importance of erotic power and how power informs sexual wellness and pleasure. Their works were transgressive, and they paved the way for actions born out of the awareness of our power to transgress oppressive social norms.

In a 2012 review, Nash argued that the third wave of Black feminism was filled with liberation, fun, and pleasure by articulating complex sexualities of Black women (Thompson, 2009) and moving beyond what Lee (2010) refers to as an epistemology of respectability.

Within this wave, Morgan (2015; 2017) and other hip hop feminists (Durham et al., 2013) integrated a love of hip hop, rather than just a critique of its ills, into the way we understand Black feminism. Her nuance was valuable for Black women who loved and were sexually empowered by hip hop culture and music, even as it upheld some harmful misogynoir. Morgan (2015) asserts that female hip hop artists use sex and sexuality as erotic power within a culture that is often rooted in misogyny as an opportunity to reclaim their sexuality and empower other women to be sexually liberated. Instead of what some may refer to as self-objectification, erotic power as currency allows Black female hip hop artists to use their power to express what Morgan refers to as “honest bodies that like to also fuck” (Morgan, 2015, p. 40). Morgan more pointedly called us to action around pleasure as an essential part of our liberation, extending Lorde’s articulation of the erotic into a praxis of it.

The Crunk Feminist Collective was founded by a group of hip hop feminists to create a space to support and fellowship with other feminists of marginalized identities, within and outside of the academy, that were from the hip hop generation and appreciated the Southern Black culture of ‘crunk’ (i.e., enthusiastic, energetic, and ratchet cultural norms that subvert respectability; see Cooper et al., 2017a). These hip hop feminists, similar to Morgan, acknowledge the positive cultural impact of hip hop and crunk music on their lives and are committed to dismantling the patriarchy. To advance the work of hip hop feminism, the collective created the Ten Crunk Commandments for Reinvigorating Hip Hop Feminist Studies (see Cooper et al., 2017b). Commandment #5 is especially relevant for #HotGirlScience. Commandment #5, avoid the *pitfalls of presentism*, means our discussion of #HotGirlScience must be bigger than Megan Thee Stallion’s current popularity and the resurfacing of the term “hot girl”, rather we have to ensure that the #HotGirlScience paradigm will be relevant and useful to scholars for years to come.

More recently, Kendall (2020) reminded us about not only who White feminists forgot, but also who the largely middle-class Black feminist canon only cursorily addressed. Different from hip hop feminism, hood feminism addressed the way the stories of Black life in hood communities is only investigated to uphold a grim picture of Blackness, including Black sexualities. Contributing to sexology, she also used her Twitter platform to interrogate the sexualization and slut-shaming of Black girls and women with the #FastTailedGirls conversation (see Kendall, 2013).

Finally, artists from Lil’ Kim, Foxy Brown, and Trina, to Cardi B, Nicki Minaj, and Megan Thee Stallion embody these multifaceted Black feminisms in practice. Their legible branding of Black feminisms translated these frameworks for the masses. For example, these artists reclaimed the terms (e.g., hot girls) Black male hip hop artists applied to Black women as potential controlling images and endorsed self-definition that denounced respectability politics. They amplified the value of sexual pleasure and erotic empowerment for Black women as erotic revolutionaries (see Lee, 2010), with a hood ethic. Real #HotGirlScience.

This “politics of pleasure” (Morgan, 2015) highlights the need for focus on Black women’s sexual autonomy and erotic agency without shame and pushes against the “politics of silence” that frames Black women’s sexuality as something that should be kept in silence and regulated for the sake of respectability politics (Hammonds, 2017). Hip hop feminism, crunk feminism,

and hood feminism are rooted in a politics of pleasure which centers Black women's pleasure experiences, pleasure worthiness, and sexual agency. Ohman (2020) refers to hip hop artists such as those mentioned above as Black pussy theorists. Black pussy theory is "the critical and creative tradition of considering how Black women and their genitalia figure into interlocking discourses of race, gender, and sexuality" (Ohman, 2020, p. 5). Black pussy theory builds upon hip hop feminism by focusing on the way ratchet hip hop (see Ohman, 2020 for definition) allows Black feminist reclamations of pussy through creative sense-making that condemns respectability politics and highlights the endless possibilities of pleasure (Ohman, 2020).

#HotGirlScience encourages researchers to embody their erotic power, through the four criteria below, throughout the scientific process and invite their participants to do the same. It also necessitates dissemination of findings in a way that promotes a politics of pleasure and rejects the politics of silence and respectability by articulating what is most pleasurable (Lomax, 2018). Specifically, #HotGirlScience is the empirical younger sister to hip hop feminism, asking and answering human subjects research questions that hip hop feminism has proposed theoretically. It understands itself as raised by the same ratchet and crunk feminist village and Black feminist foremothers, and it advances the good work of its big sisters beyond scholarship into science.

Real #HotGirlScience: Four Criteria

Four criteria establish whether someone is doing #HotGirlScience. These criteria were translated from Megan Thee Stallion's description of the #HotGirlSummer and applied to the study of sex research with Black samples. The self-proclaimed head Hottie, Hot Girl Meg, says a #HotGirlSummer, "It's just basically about women (and men) being unapologetically them, just having a good-ass time, hyping up your friends, doing you, not giving a damn about what nobody gotta say about it" (Townsend, 2019). She also explicitly stated that a #HotGirlSummer is gender neutral (Townsend, 2019). Below we outline how these sentiments apply to #HotGirlScience as a research paradigm. Then, we transition into how these criteria work alongside the four elements of paradigm.

Doing Me, Unapologetically

This first criterion is aligned with the concept of empowered authenticity. Rather than asking/waiting for permission or bestowed credibility, people using a #HotGirlScience paradigm "do them." Doing me is a disposition, an attitudinal posture of confidence, courage, power, and authenticity. It is an important criterion because permission or credibility may never be bestowed upon people with multiple marginalized identities. For Black women who work in academic settings where Black women's ways of being are extinguished, employing this paradigm is an act of resistance and liberation. Regardless of whether the topics you study are extramurally fundable, outside of the typical scope of your discipline, or cutting edge, this paradigm requires sexologists to ask: "Am I authentic to my values and love ethic, even when the academy scrutinizes Black women's ways of being?"

Having Fun (A Good Ass Time)

For other paradigms (e.g., positivist, critical), science is a serious endeavor. The toxic seriousness (Leaf, 2013) of the academy often perpetuates an absence of fun, but one can conduct rigorous research and still have fun. The #HotGirlScience paradigm requires sexologists to ask: “Does the research process facilitate joy? Are the questions I ask and the products I create fun?” This has implications for the entire research process, from study conceptualization to research design, to dissemination. Even with mundane and potentially grueling tasks such as data entry, data cleaning, and conversations with institutional review boards, listening to good music, engaging the process as a temporarily tedious part of an overall fun project, and doing the work in community can facilitate joy. Along each step, if the researchers conflate rigor with toxic seriousness, rather than intentional attention to important details, it isn’t real #HotGirlScience.

Sex Positivity

As a necessary intervention on sex research using marginalized samples, sex-positive frameworks (Williams et al., 2015) balance the deficit-focused narratives often presented (Hargons et al., 2020). This can include deficits that are victim-blaming pointed at the people being studied, as well as deficits that are system-focused that highlight the oppressive forces at the omission of the resilience, strengths, and “good stuff” related to sex. Sex-positive frameworks focus on strengths of marginalized populations to inform their overall well-being, happiness, and their ability to have open and honest communication about sex, including pleasure, across varying social structures (Williams et al., 2015). Jones (2019) argued erasure of good stuff, such as sexual pleasure, was a problem in the field of sexology. She states, “an appropriate and sexually affirming approach [to research] would require that sexual scientists are attentive to pleasure, alongside pain, and do so using an intersectional framework that is also attentive to how race, class and gender shape people’s sexual lives and choices” (Jones, 2019, p. 246-24). Under a #HotGirlScience paradigm, sex science would include understudied sex-positive aspects such as passion, desire, good sex, pleasure, orgasms, intimacy, and sexual function among marginalized populations. A question to ask related to this criterion is: “Am I studying and amplifying pleasure and sexual wellness holistically, especially for people who are marginalized?”

Hyping Up My Friends

Black women have created amazing sex scholarship and were among the pioneers in sexology. For example, June Dobbs Butts worked alongside Masters and Johnson (Butts, 2016); however, her work is rarely cited in sexology journals (see Google Scholar for her citation counts). The #CiteBlackWomen (Smith et al., 2021) movement has already begun to address this neglect of Black women’s contributions in scholastic circles, and the #HotGirlScience paradigm amplifies their call to action in sexology. We argue that the sexology canon is lacking if it only minimally engages the work of people who are multiply marginalized, specifically Black women. Thus, for this criterion, a question to ask is: “Am I citing Black women, as well as anyone who is a friend to Black people in word and deed?” Both word and deed are imperative here, as the alignment of these two ways of extending friendship to Black people circles back to authenticity as a criterion. If the deeds don’t match the words, then it isn’t real #HotGirlScience.

Four Elements of a #HotGirlScience Paradigm

The four elements of a research paradigm provide additional questions and recommendations to guide sex research. They make plain the assumptions under which a research project is being conducted. Below we present an overview of what these can include for #HotGirlScience, although it is outside of the scope of this paper to discuss fully these elements of the paradigm philosophically. For in-depth overviews, see Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) or Ponterotto (2005).

Epistemology

Epistemology is how we know something and what counts as knowledge. #HotGirlScience upholds both intuitive and authoritative knowledge as its epistemology. This means if your knowledge of a subject is not based on insights or intuition developed as a result of living that experience, you “better ask somebody” who knows. You can have people with that lived experience as participants in your research, but that does not go far enough. You need them as members of the research team to do it justice, otherwise your ability to interpret the value and relevance of the knowledge they’ve provided will be inadequate at best, and problematic or violent at worst. This epistemology also promotes that all research is intervention, with the goal of active liberation as an outcome of participating in the research process: for sexologists and participants. For members of the RISE² research team (led by Hargons), research team meetings and projects have reportedly been a source of liberation and provided opportunities for team members to be their authentic selves during the research process while centering marginalized voices. The epistemology of #HotGirlScience aligns with Crunk Feminist Commandment #9, *lived realities still matter*.

Ontology

The ontology, or nature of reality, of the #HotGirlScience paradigm is that reality is shaped by context and the level of power one has – and believes they have – within their contexts. Both power and context are simultaneously shaping reality, and a person’s level of critical and liberation consciousness allows them to deploy their internal and external resources to transform reality. For example, as Black women we can identify the context of intersecting oppression that organizes the academy, and we can simultaneously transform these systems in the work we do day to day. In sexology, this means the sex-positive topics we choose to write about and persist in publishing, despite potential biases against the topics that constitute our realities, gradually shape reality in the way we imagine it can be. Both our privileged identities and our internal resources born of marginalization (i.e., cultural values, love, radical hope) allow us to imagine realities that we believe we have the power to manifest.

Methodology

Methodology is the research process, beginning to end, including the steps – methods – one takes for each part of the process. Mixed methods, qualitative, and participatory action research methodologies are aligned with the #HotGirlScience paradigm. These methodologies give the researchers access to the sexual lives of participants in a way that can uncover intuitive

and authoritative knowledge. Only #HotGirlScience scholars born and immersed in the sexualities they study can use quantitative methodologies and do them justice, because their interpretation is the only justifiable frame for authenticity, fun, and sex positivity.

Axiology

The axiology in #HotGirlScience is a love ethic (hooks, 2000) and other values that are born of the integration of Black feminisms. For example, emotions, enthusiasm, care, fun, joy, and pleasure have a central place in #HotGirlScience. “Nothing about us without us” is a part of the code of ethics undergirding this axiology. It puts a stop to the current sexology mainstay of people studying sexualities of marginalized people from a deficit lens to acquire extramural funding when they have no ties to these communities outside of the research project, even if their desire is to do good. It requires the inclusion and citation of Black women and Black queer people, whether they are established academic scholars or not. Further, if the results are not disseminated in accessible, legible ways – if the people studied don’t have the results made available to them in ways they understand – it’s unethical. Sharing the data and asking the people what questions they want us to ask of it are necessary. Also, it requires the most loving, sex-positive, nuanced interpretation of the research results. This means that even when the results are negative and not sex-positive or liberatory, researchers acknowledge and state the results but interpret them in meaningful and robust ways that reflect the full context of history and politics that inform the outcomes. Researchers, especially those publishing in academic journals, should ask of themselves: “How would participants feel if they read what I wrote about them, their sexualities, and their lived experiences?”

Conclusion

Being a hot girl is more than a way of life. It is a transformational way of creating new knowledge and conducting research. The evolution of the term hot girl over the last 20 years, along with the rise of third wave Black feminism, including hip hop, crunk, and hood feminisms, have the power to transform the narrative of Black sexology to one that is sex-positive, liberating, and pleasure-filled. #HotGirlScience aims to focus on sexual liberation of participants, while also liberating Black women and femme scholars from the toxic seriousness of academia, to foster research that is rooted in love and filled with joy, not obligation and sacrifices to appease funders. We conclude that - with care – this paradigm may be applied to and used by non-Black, but still racially/ethnically marginalized, people too.

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Close the Door and Open Your Mind: Advancing Sexual Openness in the Nursing Home

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Abstract

Sexuality does not end when nursing home placement begins, yet nursing home personnel can be restrictive about allowing residents to enjoy sexual intimacy due to a host of reasons, from ageism to fear of litigation. This article discusses how nursing home residents are often discouraged from sexual connection and shares the author's examples of sexual relationships challenged in long-term care. Sexual expression among older adults remains a rich topic to investigate. Literature and recommendations are presented to encourage a productive conversation about the need for more sex-positive nursing home policies and practices. Training to normalize sexual expression in a supportive nursing home environment has been viewed as beneficial to nursing home residents for added quality of life.

Introduction

American society tends to hold problematic attitudes about sex. Sex is celebrated, so long as it is related to youthful or beautiful adults, or related to our own sexual desires (Allen, 2017). When sex pertains to older people, particularly those with physical, psychological, or cognitive decline, and in a nursing home setting, it often becomes restricted, controlled, or feared (Brassolotto et al., 2020; Engber, 2008; Reingold & Burros, 2004; White, 2010). Sex has multiple physical and psychological benefits for older adults in general, and for nursing home residents in particular, who have reported improved fitness, reduced pain, lower rates of depression, and reduced risk of heart disease (Farnham, 2003). Staff also note that when sex is allowed more freely among residents who are able to make consensual decisions, everyone is happier. Mutually agreed upon physical touch has shown benefits with respect to sleep, depression, anxiety, and loneliness (Sharkey & Lamoreux, 2021).

Older adults in general face a multitude of stereotypes, where dimensions of oppression and discrimination arise, including ageism, lookism, ableism, heterocentrism, and even classism (Gugliucci & Whittington, 2014). They are either ignored as sexual beings, cast as asexual, or conversely, viewed as hypersexual if showing interest in self-pleasure or consensual sex (Tupy et al., 2015, Villar et al., 2020). The reality is that the majority of older adults are still interested in sexual expression (Doll, 2016) with some 26% of persons between the ages of 75 and 85 reporting being sexually active, 20% of couples with at least one person having cognitive loss still active, and the majority wishing they still were (Ballard, 1995; Doll, 2016). Tupy et al. (2015) cited that older adults reported sexual activity and frequency at rates that resembled younger adults' reported activity. Advanced age could be a time where freedom and varied experiences of an array of pleasure-giving and pleasure-seeking behaviors could liberate rather than hinder sexual activity.

Approximately 5% of older adults and persons with disabilities live in the nursing home setting. However, people 65 and older have a 52% likelihood of spending some time in a nursing home in their lifetime (National Center for Health Statistics, 2022). Nursing homes also house persons with disabilities under the age of 65 at nearly 18% (Doll, 2016). Within these settings, rules and restrictions about sexual expression and intimacy abound for all ages despite advocacy efforts to humanize the more than 14,000 facilities serving over 1.4 million residents nationwide (Smye et al., 2020). Some nursing homes actively promote a progressive view of sexuality and have policies on understanding and encouraging psychological and physical intimacy (Dessel & Ramirez, 1995). However, the acceptance of sexual expression largely rests on the pro-sexual philosophy of administrators, nursing, and social work staff (Lindsay, 2010). In 2015, only a quarter of facilities had written policies related to sexual expression, but many said they're working on it (Scott, 2015).

For many, sexual expression in the nursing home can sound like a punchline to a joke, and often is. Nursing home staff can find it anywhere from disgusting to disruptive to find their residents interested in reading, viewing, or accessing sexually explicit materials to provide release or to continue with what many have done in private for decades (Brassolotto et al., 2020). Sexuality is often taboo, particularly for older generations who were taught to keep such matters private or to avoid urgings altogether, and it can prove uncomfortable for children to hear about mom or dad feeling soothed by closeness with another partner, or mom or dad wishing to masturbate or acquire items used for self- or mutual pleasure, or their relative turning to same-sex experiences when the family views them as strictly heterosexual. Some residents shared that it is too dicey to try to have a relationship with everyone knowing the details of their business, so it is better to escape romantically into a book (Brassolotto et al., 2020).

Uncomfortable Topic for Most Workers: Sexuality of Nursing Home Residents

Despite staff reporting that sexual activities are commonplace in their nursing homes, most nursing home staff remain largely uncomfortable with it, calling it a challenge (Scott, 2015). Eighty percent of facilities polled reported that there have been sexual relationships or activities occurring regularly, but agree that sexual expression poses problems (Fairchild et al., 1996). Seventy percent of Directors of Nursing have reported discomfort with addressing the issue of sex in the nursing home (Roach, 2004). Personnel in nursing homes report that it can be easier to restrict sexual activity than to allow it, because providing accommodations is considered more complicated and time consuming (Brassolotto et al., 2020). Such efforts to discourage sexuality are detrimental not only to residents, but also to the overall functioning of the nursing home team due to power struggles and overriding resident rights (Lester et al., 2015).

Social workers and social service designees (persons occupying the social work role without a degree) are often the key agents to uphold resident rights in nursing homes, but the majority say they need more training. Only about a third of the nation's nursing home social service staff possess social work degrees and licensure, despite urgings from the professional, academic, and advocacy community (Bern-Klug et al., 2021). The majority of social service directors in Bern-Klug and Cordes' (2021) study reported a moderate or strong interest in training related to sexual intimacy in the nursing home.

Demonstrating this interest, several nursing home social service staff openly shared ideas during a workshop in Louisiana on strategies to create meaningful opportunities for sexual pleasure/rights among their residents, including purchasing pornographic material or vibrators for residents, designating rooms for intimacy in the facility, and sharing cases including methods to help position a resident with paralysis to experience oral sex with her partner (Allen, 2019). Others shared how residents have been exploited or *catfished* (fallen prey to a person who presents as another often for the purpose of a scam) when seeking out online suitors or sexual outlets. Also discussed was finding ways to keep residents who had lost sexual inhibitions safe and private rather than being restricted or ridiculed.

Examples of How Residents are Discouraged from Sexual Connection

Years ago, as a social worker in a rural, religious-affiliated 120 bed facility, I heard the nursing staff laughing about a married couple desiring a private visit so they could be intimate. The Director of Nursing sarcastically suggested that the couple should use my office, “where they could have sex on my glass top desk.” The couple had been married over 65 years, and desired to be together in the comfort and familiarity of each other’s arms with the opportunity for privacy – often a scarce commodity in nursing homes. This case became subject to care planning scrutiny: it’s dangerous, they could fall, perhaps the community-living husband is exploiting the institutionalized wife. In the end, we found a way to accommodate the couple, and they were grateful for it. Handling the request humanely rather than sarcastically made the difference between frustration and satisfaction.

An example from another facility was related to a same-sex couple who fell in love. The problem was that one of the women (wealthy – with a very powerful attorney son) was viewed by her family as strictly heterosexual, tricked into the relationship by the lesbian, whose care was covered by Medicaid. The perception from family and some staff was that the woman with lesser means was manipulating the richer woman and exacerbating her cognitive decline. However, the evidence showed that the restrictions—including physical removal from each other—on their togetherness made everything worse for both. The case made it all the way to the state Ombudsman who encouraged the relationship so long as the two were interested and able to express their interest. Despite this recommendation, the son overrode the decision and, on my (social service director’s) day off, the staff under the direction of the Director of Nursing moved the residents to opposite sides of the facility, making the journey in a self-propelled wheelchair more difficult and giving more people the opportunity to intercept and turn them around. Both residents declined and died within the year. This example underscores what the existing scholarship has already established—heterocentrism, classism, ageism, and ableism abound in the nursing home setting and have adverse effects for the residents (Aguilar, 2017).

Overriding Rights, Leaving Sex Out of the Standards

Nursing homes are known as some of the most regulated enterprises in the United States with everything from fluid intake, type of restraints, wound care, and activities, as well as the right to complain without retaliation, as part of the mandates. Nursing homes have historically been places where “assembly line” type of medical oversight, bathing, dressing, eating, is often paired with a population that has historically been marginalized, stereotyped, abused, and ignored.

There remains a dehumanization of sorts in facilities that lack understanding of the benefits of sex. Restricting pleasure can be the ultimate rule of control and is common in institutional settings such as nursing homes. Nursing homes have been said to be even more restrictive about sexual freedom than prisons (Pillemer & Moore, 1990).

After advocates in long term care demonstrated that little was done to personalize resident care, changes were made to nursing home standards in 1986 under the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (OBRA) to better document residents' choices, such as desire to return home, optimize socialization, and provide more complete mental health assessments. Yet no specific attention was given related to sexual expression or sexual rights. Society often wants to keep the door closed on the unhealthy conditions in long term care facilities, places that tend to be viewed as undesirable settings to live in. Violating residents' right to sexual intimacy not only hinders individual expression, but also reinforces the belief that older people should not be seen, heard, or enjoy their own, or others' bodies. Research has recently documented the condition of skin hunger, or touch starvation that is especially felt when people are only touched or approached for reasons of routine care, or not touched at all; cortisol levels and stress increase when there is a touching void, and enjoyable touch releases endorphins and lowers stress (Sharkey & Lamoroux, 2021).

Expressions of sexual intimacy can be additionally complicated for nursing home residents with dementia. The degree to which severe cognitive impairment limits the ability to consent may be lower than some may expect, and there is a notable range. Although more than half of nursing home residents have some cognitive decline, approximately 38% of the nursing home population have no cognitive impairment (Doll, 2016). Moderate cognitive impairment stands at approximately 26% of all nursing home residents, with approximately 36% having severe cognitive impairment (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), 2015). Beyond cognitive decline, threats to enjoying sexual intimacy loom, such as staff resistance, fear of litigation, sheer discomfort due to lack of training – not to mention the privacy limitations in nearly every nursing home. While sexual urge and sexual regularity may wane with age, the desire for sex and sexual expression do not. Irrespective of a person's age or cognitive status, diagnosis, medication, the stress of being deprived of natural sexual opportunities may even heighten sexual urges or interest (Bauer et al., 2012; Engber, 2008).

All nursing home residents have plans of care established by an interdisciplinary team (nursing, recreation, social work, therapies, physicians, dieticians) to optimize wellbeing throughout the nursing home stay. Psychosocial needs are the domain of the social service personnel and defined as the thoughts, behaviors, feelings, social connections, that influence, enhance, or hinder the impact of physical and emotional functioning (Roberts et al., 2020). Sexual expression falls squarely in the psychosocial realm, but is largely neglected (Smye et al., 2020). Care planning related to sexual activity, interest, or expression is usually reserved for residents who are deemed to have a pathology, problem, or fixation on sex rather than those who show an interest in healthy sexual activity (Bowen & Zimmerman, 2009; Engber, 2008; Smye et al., 2020). Care planning for sexual activity – either individual or partnered, is far more likely to relate to a reduction of “sexual inappropriateness,” which is largely operationalized by staff (Aguilar, 2017). Sexual consent becomes complicated when the resident has memory or judgment impairment linked to their diagnosis, but there are still methods to assess if consent

between two parties is present (Smye et al., 2020; Snow et al., 2018). In short, within nursing homes—places for short- and long-term stays, whether for rehabilitation or chronic convalescent care—a host of subjective interpretation is adopted when determining whether a nursing home resident is able to participate in consensual sex. It may be easier to restrict sexual expression than to allow it, particularly with environmental limits such as the majority of all nursing home residents living in semi-private/shared rooms. Maslow (1943) who established a Hierarchy of Human Needs famously spoke of sex as being as fundamental to human functioning as breathing or sleep, even more essential than shelter. Yet it seems once an older adult has shelter and care by way of a nursing home, sex is voided as a necessity of life (Brassolotto, 2020). Sexual health is related to overall health, and those who are sexually active either individually or with others are happier than those who have had limits imposed on them (Hinchliff, 2016). The benefits of sexual activity are established and include improved heart functioning, lower blood pressure, calorie burning, reduced stroke risk, improved sleep, muscle strengthening, connectivity with others, and psychological wellbeing (Farnham, 2003; Rogers, 2018; Sharkey & Lamaroux, 2021). Given what we know, is the culture of nursing homes hindering health by restricting sexual openness among its residents?

Fairchild et al. (1996) examined nursing homes and feelings about sexuality in the late 90's as did Cooper a decade earlier (1981), finding an abundant array of limitations and restrictions. Current literature promotes sexual expression education (Bell et al., 2010; Bern-Klug & Cordes, 2021). New York is often a forerunner of advancement when it comes to both measuring perceptions and advancing options. In 2002, NY set new standards for sexuality in nursing homes, but that progressive stance is not shared nationwide (Aguilar, 2017). Engber (2008) wrote on "*naughty nursing homes*" bringing up the reality that it's time to change practices toward sexual acceptance among nursing homes, and some facilities already have, but far too few.

Conclusion/Implications

Institutions are representations of the broader society, and while nursing home care may be improving, sexual expression policies and educational needs for staff remain neglected in the majority of U.S. facilities (Aguilar, 2017). Education and revised policies are needed to understand and debunk myths related to sexuality, including the intersectionality of age and ability, to provide nursing home residents with the right to engage in sexual intimacy across the life course (Aizenberg & Weizman, 2002; Bern-Klug & Cordes, 2021; Engber, 2008; White, 2010).

The time is overdue to urge people working with nursing home residents to examine their own views on sexual expression among the nation's nursing home residents, and in broader society. Policies and practices should favor support for optimal life fulfillment rather than imposing restrictions based on a vague notion of "safety" (Lindsay, 2010).

To reduce the stigma of sexual expression in the nursing home, it is recommended:

- To normalize sexuality in older adults – to allow open sharing among residents and their loved ones on relationships and desires and to incorporate such wishes in care planning.
- Interview residents who can share their feelings about sex, and include the discussion during admission and at designated care planning assessments.
- Talk candidly to families. Draft and discuss policies on sexual expression.
- Talk candidly with staff. Allow sharing sessions with facilitators who are competent and comfortable with human sexuality and the populations in their facilities. Brainstorm challenges, celebrate successes.
- Share best practices of nursing homes using a pro-health, pro-sex perspective encouraging nursing home staff to collaborate in confidential settings where problem-solving can be discussed.

A pro-sexual perspective, developed through the collaborative efforts of staff, families, and especially residents themselves, will lead to healthier and happier nursing home residents and workers.

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

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

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

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

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