

Sexuality in Graduate Curricula: Theoretical Frameworks and Entreaty for Developing Scholarship

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Abstract

Intended as both elaboration and synthesis of these authors' previous work (Sexuality in Graduate Curricula: Education, Integration, and Implication for Social Work), this paper provides a critical analysis of existing theoretical perspectives on sexuality and seeks to explain their value to individuals, to social workers, and to society. As interpreted by sociology, sexuality is regulated by societal norms, and expectations of behavior are entrenched within the tapestry of institutions designed to promote them, judged by the context in which they occur. This paper seeks to explore this underlying construct and offer a critical analysis of the many theories which its application has begotten. In addition, it examines the topic's complexity and underscores the need for ongoing research. The authors hope the reader will see the time is now, to incorporate relevant discourse into professional practice. As presented herein, this challenge is no better tackled than by developing MSW curricula inclusive of sexuality.

Keywords: Sociological theory, Sexuality, Social Work, Education, Perspectives

Theoretical Frameworks: Introduction

A vital aspect of identity, sociologists have long studied sexuality in its various functions, paying particular attention not only to its role in society, but to its influence on norms and values at the personal and community levels. Inherently a physical, emotional, and social construct, the World Health Organization (WHO) has suggested that sexuality can be expressed in diverse ways - including but not limited to desires, fantasies, beliefs, values, practices, thoughts, and relationships (WHO, 2022). While each individual will experience these dimensions uniquely, the WHO maintains that sexuality is influenced by the interaction of countless factors - biological, psychological, social, cultural, economic, political, legal, historical, religious, and spiritual - a premise which underscores the intricacy at its core. Both ubiquitous and elusive, the onus on social workers is dire not just to be versed in this arena but prepared to engage in its discourse.

Intrinsically personal, sexuality cannot be defined by any single trope, nor confined to any category of extant social work practice. Indeed, if sexuality is manifest in diverse ways (WHO, 2022), is culturally produced and influenced by the interplay of a multiplicity of factors (Halperin, 2003), and should be considered a part of self-identity (Caplan, 1996), then by sheer logic alone its experiential value is neither immutable nor uniform. While this basal ebb and flow poses innate challenges, so too does it justify the need for academia to reckon with the scope and implication of sexuality in social work practice.

As with all areas of social work, it is dangerous to compartmentalize sexuality within preconceived norms. Though one may combat this inclination via a combination of mindfulness, education, and training, the wary practitioner must adopt a broad and inclusive approach that gives sexuality a tangible form and evidence of its fluidity (Jones & Jacombs, 2021). To be sure, the implementation of such open-mindedness serves to promote the continual expansion of relevant and accurate knowledge within the field of sexuality and social work - a prerequisite in the quest to encapsulate and understand its depth. Not only would doing so improve the social worker's grasp on each client's experience, but also guide one's sense of direction and purpose by means of a research-based lens (Deacon & Macdonald, 2017). And yet - despite its primordial role in the human condition - sexuality remains a phenomenological anomaly, understudied and misunderstood.

The Role and History of Theoretical Diversity in Sexuality

An organized set of principles regarding a particular subject, a theory is any construct by which we encapsulate meaning. Sociologically, theories deal with issues considered centrally significant, designed to provide various standpoints from which the social world can be observed and address social problems that are far-reaching in scope (Ritzer, 2011).

Whereas the general populace is liable to consider sexuality solely within the context of interpersonal relationships, there lies beneath, a need for theoretical pedagogy. Sexual norms are linked to many social problems in the United States (Anderson et al., 2017) and have a substantial impact on health, interactions, perceptions, and outcomes (Little and McGivern, 2016).

Both mainstream and maverick sociological theories have been commandeered in the quest to intellectualize sexuality. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully expound on these efforts, the following will examine several theoretical analyses through which the nature of sexuality is framed and its relation, function, and place in society described. In doing so, the reader is invited to ponder the role of sexuality through both an individual and social lens, and to introspect one's own experience as the channel through which countertransference is manifest. At the forefront of social change, ethical practitioners must avail themselves of knowledge, reckon with any internalized bias, and commit to the advocacy of revolt against an oppressive status quo.

Theoretical Perspective: Social Stratification

A field of sociology referencing the ranking of individuals in *strata* or hierarchy, social stratification distinguishes an individual as inferior or superior (Lenski, 2013). Fueled by philosophical questions of personal worth, theorists view society as stratified by social class, the result of which governs individual and inter-community rights, privilege, power, access to resources, self-determination, and lifestyle. A construct based in inequality and in existence for millennia, social stratification is essentially the narrative of an unequal society in which rewards, resources, and positions are determined (Lenski, 2013).

In 1848, Karl Marx and Charles Engels (as cited in Lenski, 2013) postulated that the nature of distributive systems was essentially a function of productive systems. Seidman (2015) noted that capitalists desired to see employees akin to machines, and anything that inhibited the maximization of production such as sensual feeling, was viewed as an obstruction to efficacy. Marx and Engels also posited that social evolution and economic advancement occur as the result of a dialectic in which class is the basic unit of society - thus, class itself becomes the dynamic force in history, its struggle and success the compulsory nuts and bolts for social progress (Lenski, 2013). While Marx (as cited in Lenski, 2013) believed that rewards should be distributed "to each according to his needs," he viewed the social order as nothing but a device of oppression, used by the ruling class to exploit the masses. He maintained that economy was the dominant social institution around which other structures of society were organized.

Of Marx's postulation, Seidman (2015) wrote that just as workers were shaped into industrial workhands, business owners became capitalists. Though acts of evident consumption were designed to flaunt class status, Seidman (2015) described 19th century capitalists as anxious individuals. He suggested that in an uncertain market, capitalists sought to maintain their competitive edge by postponing spending and avoiding personal indulgence - giving rise to a "repressed personality type" wherein sexual desires were dangerous and disruptive of discipline. Seidman postulated further that these market economies driven by competitive pressure created a sexual culture that valued self-control and the avoidance of erotic pleasure; essentially, the desexualization of workers and efforts to mold their physiological drive to the machinery of production (Seidman, 2015). Thus, a requisite and revered element of work ethic, the de facto suppression of sexuality was born.

Then came Freud (as cited in Caplan, 1996) who promoted his belief that libido - the energy produced by sexual predisposition - was one of the most powerful drivers of human behavior. Consequently, the repressive view of sexuality instilled by Marxism shifted to one of sexual permissiveness under Freud among others, became the core of our traditional Western model of sexuality (Caplan, 1996), and normalized its ascension to scholasticism.

Known to associate sexuality with power, the ubiquity of sexual segregation appears rampant in patriarchal society (Fati, 2012; Millet, 2016). Through this lens, Millet argued that sexual violence is a form of power motivated by the social inequality between men and women - not, to the contrary, an expression of human sexuality. Having reduced the sexual collective of male/female into an infinite array of distinct circumstance, "masculine" culture has come to define sexual politics as exclusive from personal relationships (Fati, 2012; Millet, 2016). Millet went on to suggest that any resistance to power (within the context of sexual politics) is seen as an act of neuroticism; case in point, Millet asserted that the inclusion of women in suffrage was a device to preserve traditional sexual politics, and that all similar tactics used by masculine culture are but efforts to distort reality.

As postulated by Weber (1998), burgeoning awareness of compulsory heterosexuality has positioned it at the center of intellectual and political conversation. Sexuality, along with class, race, and gender has become rudimentary in the epistemological framework of present-day social relationships and emotional processes. Anderson et al. (2017) posited that in modern day, this system continues in both personal relationships and social arrangements.

We see these sexual politics reflected in the high rate of violence against women and sexual minorities, and the privilege and power conferred upon those assumed to be heterosexual (Anderson et al., 2017; Collins, 2014).

Evolved as it may be from its origin, an understanding of the socio-stratified dynamic between power and oppression is essential to diversity competence in social work practice (Sue et al., 2016).

Subject to discrimination and bias, vulnerable populations caught within this construct are relegated to the social sideline, irrevocably caste by the systemic scaffolding of their dehumanization.

Theoretical Perspective: Social Constructionism

As posited by Berger and Luckmann (1991), we construct our own society and accept it as-is simply because others have created it before us. This social constructionist view is rooted in the belief that all knowledge and perception of reality is socially situated; comprising individual experience with one's dynamic environment, "what is 'real' to one, may not be to another" (p. 14). Thus defined by a subjective versus objective perspective of reality, social constructionism maintains that sexuality is socially constructed; signifying that it is assigned meaning by society and can evolve over time and across cultures. Though further discussion herein would be tangential, DeLamater and Hyde (1998) emphasized the role of language in cultural dissemination, and its influence as a channel through which one interprets experience.

Accordingly, sexuality is both complex and transiently simple; at any point in time, it can be defined by the social context in which it is lived. In the United States, this definition has historically been categorized as either heterosexual or homosexual - a striking binarism within the spectrum of sexuality. Throughout time, these simplified categories have implanted feelings of inadequacy and isolation for those who do not classify within its walls. By definition, discrimination becomes based on sexual desire, love, and attraction, versus the traditional assumption that heterosexuality predates society. Katz (2007) suggested that it was in fact historically invented and argued that the hetero/homosexuality dichotomy is not in nature, but is socially constructed and consequently deconstructable. Hannon (2014) advised that within this essentialism, the difference between heterosexuality and homosexuality is a construct deceitful about its identity as a paradigm. Hannon contended that this classification acts as a smokescreen for ordinary classes which applies to all persons in all times and places, in accordance with the objects of their sexual desires.

Similarly, Foucault (1985) viewed the concept of sexuality not as a label that one can cast off, but as a structure imbued within the fabric of modern society; it shapes both our understanding of the world and our place in it. As such, Foucault described sexuality as a "fragile construct" with immense power; the result of a world which values and rewards certain identities - and often ruthlessly punishes those who do not fit the "mold." To this end, Adrienne Rich (as cited in Anderson et al., 2017) has proposed the concept of "compulsory heterosexuality" - the idea that heterosexual identity is not a choice, but the only legitimate form of sexual identity as permitted by dominant social institutions. Rich argued that compulsory heterosexuality is enforced through social norms and sanctions such as peer pressure, socialization, legal and economic policies, and violence (Anderson et al., 2017).

While the social constructionist view of sexuality sees past social strata and examines the intersection of various identities, it muddles the boundaries between essentialist categories, such as male and female, which are regarded naturally as binary and opposite (Ore, 2006). Withal, this perspective honors the interplay of biology and culture (i.e., nurture v. nature), but inherently runs the risk of disenfranchising the autonomous human experience, unraveled from environmental forces.

Theoretical Perspective: Functionalism

Spawned from the cross-generational horrors of World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II, functionalism was a post-war development which gained traction amidst American sociologists in the 1940s and 50s (Repo, 2013). Functionalists suggest that sexuality, a primary human behavior, is controlled by society. This perspective assumes that society is in a state of equilibrium maintained through the function of its constituent parts (Lincoln & Guillot, 2004). Founded in the work of Emile Durkheim, functionalists examine the mechanisms by which society maintains social order. Durkheim argued that this order was contingent on how well society was able to regulate individual behavior (Lincoln & Guillot, 2004).

As suggested in its name, functionalism views sexuality as a reflection of its contribution to social institutions. Categorized as either manifest (specified, apparent reasons for an action) or latent (not at first known nor deliberate), functionalists witness the outcomes of practice across a range of social establishments such as schools, prisons, and families (van Wormer et al., 2007). In this way, functionalists interpret each component of society in terms of how it contributes to the stability of the whole.

Of the functional role of sexuality, one must simply look at the tradition of intercourse as a matter of wedlock. The result is institutionalized heterosexuality, which has come to define the heterosexual family as the social norm (Lind, 2004). By viewing the family unit as an essential element in society, functionalists uphold a stringent focus on its attainment and argue in favor of social structures that value family preservation (Little & McGivern, 2016). From this perspective, the promotion of sexual activity as confined to marriage not only aims to strengthen the bond between spouses, but ensures that procreation occurs within a stable and legally recognized relationship.

While functionalists such as Talcott Parsons (as cited in Little and McGivern, 2016) maintain that the regulation of sexual activity is an imperative function of the family, modern shifts in society have defied the functionalist premise. Take, for example, the proliferation and legalization of same-sex marriage, or the rise in non-traditional forms of childbearing and rearing. At such a juncture, one must consider whether the recipient of functional purpose becomes not the society, but the individual.

Theoretical Perspective: Conflict Theory

Conflict theory emphasizes the role of power and coercion in society and the ability of some to control and influence others. Under this perspective, society is viewed as comprising various groups in competition for resources (Anderson et al., 2017). Social order is maintained not by accord but domination - power lies in the hands of those with the most political, economic, and social assets. According to this theory, those in disproportionate control actively defend their advantage by exercising power over others, resulting in inequality and struggles of power (Anderson et al., 2017; Lind, 2004). Though unfair, such conflict endures via the privileged usurpation of social position to influence societal beliefs; strategies might include the control of public data and a hold on influential institutions (Anderson et al., 2017).

Of particular concern to conflict theorists is the interminable strife between race, class, gender, and sexuality (Anderson et al., 2017; Lind, 2004;). As described by Collins (2014), variations in the social organization of violence and economic markets govern the resources available to men and women in the struggle for control, and shape predominant beliefs about sexuality. Meanwhile, Anderson et al. (2017) concluded that because sex is linked to forms of subservience and exploitation, conflict in American society is based on sexual alignment - with heterosexuals given the advantage.

Incontrovertibly, sociologists recognize that the heterosexual identity occupies a position of advantage in the United States. Heterosexism itself accepts that heterosexuality is the norm. This heteronormativity results in the unabashed promotion of discrimination against the atypical. An entrenched privilege, conflict theory illuminates the societal profit and oppression such as that witnessed in heteronormativity. As an example, Feigenbaum (2007) referenced the plentiful benefits allotted married couples - government benefits, legal rights, healthcare coverage, and spousal power of attorney, to name a few.

Theoretical Perspective: Symbolic Interactionism

With its focus on processes, symbolic interactionism seeks to explore the means through which people interpret and give meaning to the objects, events, and situations that make up their social worlds (Longres, 1995). These social worlds “represent the totality of the various locations individuals occupy in a society, including families, friendships, bureaucracies, and communities” (p. 395). Rather than framing society within abstract institutions, symbolic interactionism accentuates direct social action as the place where “society” exists. Through reflection, people give sense to their behavior, while through meaning they interpret the behaviors, events, or things that happen in society (Brickell, 2007; Longmore, 1998). Symbolic interactionism is extensively contingent upon the illustrative understanding acquired and used during social contacts (Salvani, 2010).

Derived from the work of the Chicago School, symbolic interactionism allows for analyzing society by addressing the personal meaning that people impose on actions or behaviors. Subjective meaning is valued because people’s behaviors are premised on their beliefs, not just on what is objectively true. Interpretations of each other’s behavior creates social bonds, known as the “definition of the situation” (Anderson et al., 2017). To be sure, an interesting symbiosis: society as socially constructed through human interpretation, with the meaning ascribed to behavior constantly modified by social interaction.

Through the eyes of a social interactionist, sexuality is seen as a social construct which operates on the premise of what one believes to be true about people given their outward appearances; heterosexuality is perceived as static and universal. These socially constructed meanings help us choose who we wish to interact with and how to figure out their words or actions (albeit every so often, erroneously) (Crossman, 2018). Mirroring Katz’s (2007) premise that heterosexuality is a social invention, Crossman (2018) suggested that social interactionism is manifest in the problematic symbolization of “man” and “woman,” as evidenced in the college trend of rating male professors more positively than female ones.

Aware that heterosexuality existed before it was named in the early nineteenth century, Katz (2007) stated that the labeling and visualizing of heterosexuality played a significant role in merging the construction of the heterosexual’s social existence. Katz argued that the recognition of heterosexuality as a time-bound and culturally specific construct challenges the power of the heterosexual ideal (Katz, 2007). The question then becomes, is dissolution of those norms designed to reinforce a socially constructed and accepted system of sexuality?

Theoretical Perspective: Feminism

In exploring the politics of sexuality, Freedman and Thorne (1984) viewed sexuality as an arena of both oppressive inequalities and constructive struggles toward women’s liberation. Such feminist perspectives of sexuality offer a philosophical critique of heterosexuality directly shaped by the oppression of women.

Founded in the examination of heterosexuality as a patriarchal institution, feminist theory maintains the interplay of gendered power relations via sexuality (Anderson et al., 2017; MacKinnon, 1989). For MacKinnon (1989), society conditions male and female sexualities: masculinity is viewed as sexually dominant and femininity, sexually subservient. MacKinnon does not suppose that male domination was a corollary of social learning, but a manifestation of power.

While feminist theory recognizes the relevance of both nurture and nature, so too does it adopt the premise of conflict theory. uniquely, however, the theory adds sex as a component to the study of society (Collins, 2000). Though not elaborated herein, the novel deconstructing of male power as asserted in feminist theory, ultimately gave rise to intersectionality, a leading theory which suggests that gender, race, class, and sexuality are interconnected (Cheshire, 2013; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991).

Theoretical Perspective: Queer Theory

Though historically a pejorative slight, “queer” is employed today to challenge and resist the domination manifest in heterosexism and oppression, founded in social norms (Minton, 1997). Underlying the theory is the suggestion that identities are neither intransigent nor biologically defined, but socially determined (Catalano et al., 2018). Technically a branch of critical theory, the queer model seeks to reduce domination and overcome the circumstances which limit human freedom (Catalano et al., 2018). Sexuality is seen as an arena in which power differentials prevail and dominant groups actively promote their economic interests and worldview (Little & McGivern, 2016). The perspective advocates for a more fluid construct of sexuality and casts off the prevailing gender representation of sexuality as two mutually restrictive categories. Queer theory questions the ways society perceives and experiences sexuality, making way for new scholarly insight (Little & McGivern, 2016).

Theoretical Frameworks: Entreaty for Developing Scholarship

As multifaceted as the individuals it describes, sexuality simply cannot fit neatly within current sociological categories. Both intra- and interdependent, one’s social, psychological, political, economic, and cultural experiences are linked - as are the structures of inequality which benefit some and marginalize others (Weber, 1998). Across the board, we find university programs increasingly introducing courses on such inequity - feminism, multiculturalism, diversity, inclusivity - but while scholarship and scholasticism simultaneously address the errs of race, class, and gender, human sexuality has yet to find visibility in the global graduate MSW curricula. This diffidence exists despite research findings (McKay, 2015) revealing that a majority of faculty (82%) view sexuality education as a vital component for MSW curricula.

As observed by Weber (1998), the textbooks assigned to most MSW programs are composed of readings selected mainly by faculty. These readings, Weber argued, are beneficial in their efforts to demonstrate the significance of sexuality by offering up a varied human experience and analysis. Students are encouraged to think beyond social and personal issues and exclusively from their own vantage point versus through the view of dominant groups. However, these readings provide little or no path to detecting themes and tenets that bring these viewpoints together.

A neglected area of scholarship, sexuality education has not produced extensive contending theories regarding the nature of its existence. Collins et al., (2021) stated that because the field is developing, and most of the research and scripts come from members of groups who share an “outsider within” perspective, common themes arise. Though emergent discussions appear to lean toward creative conceptualizations, viewing sexuality through the lens of oppressed groups raises new enquiries of our own predetermined ideas and beliefs of social reality.

Perhaps not surprisingly, present research appears to dodge any inference regarding the essential nature of sexual hierarchies. Instead, scholarship emphasizes sexuality as a social construct that cannot be understood outside its framework in the direct experience of “real” people (Collins et al., 2021). And yet, the social construct of sexuality suggests that even social work students will vary in their experience and perspective, shaped by age, community, and their own sexuality.

This paper has unequivocally upheld - and research bears the data - that sexuality hierarchies are power relationships. Individuals can be powerful given their insight, personality, knowledge, or any other characteristics, and can persuade others to behave in ways they otherwise would not (Jansson, 2020). Power thus accumulated from a dominant position is likely to be mirrored in similar positions or to acquire comparable privileges. Indeed, Weber (1998) argued that it is power’s systematic and pervasive embeddedness in society’s major institutions that renders sexuality a crucial schema to understand.

To acknowledge the universality of human sexuality and not incorporate it into professional academia is beyond the pale. At a minimum, its inclusion in MSW curricula would provide students the knowledge, skills, and perspective, fundamental to efficacious social work with individuals, groups, and families. But existing literature proves that students are ill-equipped to meet the needs of those under their care; that practitioners across the spectrum of healthcare are not sufficiently trained in the multidisciplinary approaches required in ethical standards of care (Verrastro et al., 2020).

And despite studies that suggest enhanced professional skill after participation in sexuality education programs, research shows that the helping professions still may hold bias toward LGBTQ+ individuals and may not be educated on their needs (Logie et al., 2007; Verrastro et al. 2020).

Conclusion

Sexuality education, then, is a moral mandate for social workers - a responsibility delineated in the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2021). Culturally competent practice demands serving the needs of people in ways that are meaningful and appropriate to them (Stubbe, 2020). This includes the ability to see the world from clients' perspectives and assist by understanding their needs. Ethically competent practice demands that we tune into the risks, barriers, and limitations that a client endures - risks, barriers, and limitations that are embedded in the very makeup of our society.

Regardless of discipline, all helping professions must be educated in an effort to develop and enhance their understanding of sexuality as a human concept. Research holds true that awareness is a direct correlate to competence - and that ignorance is to uphold the notion of worthlessness. As Foucault (1985) poignantly noted: to assert that sexuality does not matter, is to deny many the reality of their lived experience. Glaringly, it would appear that sexuality has been framed as a "them" issue - as if the dominant class owes sympathy to the plight of the vulnerable. Through this paper and future discourse, our hope is to turn this fallacy on end: human sexuality is about *us*.

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