Title:
Teaching about Sex and Sexuality in Social Work: An International Critical Perspective

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Abstract

Based on the recent call to expand the discussion about sex and sexuality in social work, and coming from an international perspective, this paper offers a theoretical and practical strategy for teaching sex and sexuality in social work. The pedagogical strategy aims at creating a critical thinking classroom. Specifically, the paper presents six key topics for teaching sex and sexuality critically in social work: 1. Sexuality in social work fields; 2. Sexuality as a social constructed phenomenon; 3. Categorizations and sexual identities; 4. Structural based privileges and disadvantages; 5. Reproduction of power asymmetries through microaggressions; 6. Expanding the conception of sexuality in social work. Each topic is presented with suggestions for literature and critical questions for classroom.

Keywords: Sex, Sexuality, Social work, Critical perspective, Critical thinking, Teaching, Pedagogy, Education

Introduction

In the last decade, scholarship on sex and sexuality in social work has been going through a transformation. New conceptualizations have been proposed that focus on the understanding of sex and sexuality as a key dimension of human relations, identity, and wellbeing as well as social oppression and difference (Dodd & Tolman, 2017; Hicks, 2008a; Morton et al., 2013; Shelton et al., 2019; Willis et al., 2016). Sexuality is seen as a socially constructed phenomenon that is part of everyone's lives, both personally and politically, and that connects body, identity, and social norms (Dunk, 2007; Nothdurfter & Nagy, 2017; Schaub et al., 2017). This emerging scholarship argues that social work should adopt a constructionist and a critical perspective on sexuality.

Together with the emerging writing, the 'Sexuality in Social Work Interest Group (International)', and conferences bringing together social work scholars within this area, is how the three of us met. Coming from Israel, Norway and USA, we met in the first and second International Social Work and Sexualities Conferences (in 2016 in Olten/Switzerland and in 2018 in Montreal/Canada). Although we live and teach in countries that politically, culturally, and religiously are different, we connected through our interest and experience in translating this new conceptualization of social work and sexualities into teaching in different international contexts.

In this article, we gather the threads from newer perspectives on sexuality. First, we explain constructionist and critical perspectives on sexuality, and then we suggest how these new perspectives can be addressed in classrooms for social work. Our aim in this paper is to offer a pedagogical strategy to teaching about sex and sexuality in social work from a critical perspective. Given the variety of social work qualification processes, curricula, standards and expectations around the globe, this article does not offer a prescribe formula for teaching. We acknowledge that teaching in different social and cultural settings demands context specific pedagogy. Hence, this article is constructed to offer a theoretical and practical starting point for teaching about sex and sexuality. Our hope is that every teacher will take these suggestions and shape them according to the specific context of their teaching.

Sexuality and the social work knowledge base

Within social work education, practice and research, sexuality is often regarded as risk, a subject of intense assessment and intervention (Dodd & Tolman, 2017; Trotter et al., 2016), or omitted from discussion all together as a private affair (Dodd & Tolman, 2017; Dunk, 2007; Trotter et al., 2016; Willis et al., 2016). Furthermore, discourses about sex and sexuality are based on a heteronormative view of sexuality (Hicks, 2008a; Hylton, 2005; Shelton & Dodd, 2020; Trotter et al., 2016), perceiving heterosexuality as natural, normal, and desirable (Trotter & Leech, 2003). This approach render the social, cultural and political aspects of sexuality invisible in professional discussion (Hicks, 2008a; McPhail, 2004; Nothdurfter & Nagy, 2017), it limits social workers' abilities to challenge societal inequalities (Galarza & Anthony, 2015; Giertsen, 2019; McKay, 2015; Willis et al., 2016) and to support positive, normative dimensions of sexuality (Dodd & Tolman, 2017).

Contemporary scholars coming from social constructionism and critical perspectives, urge to expand the existing focus on risk and illness to include discussion of sexuality in relation to diversity, power, social identity, pleasure, intimacy and relationship. For example, Dunk (2007) and Dodd and Tolman (2017) have argued in favor of developing a positive discourse on sexuality in social work or an 'every day' perception of sexuality. Their perspective focus on the importance of healthy sexuality, intimacy, pleasure, and desire for all service users, and recognize sexuality as a critical site of intersectionality. Others have maintained a human rights lens suggesting the term sexuality social justice (Galarza & Anthony, 2015). This term highlights the notion that sexual identity as well as health status should not prevent anyone from accessing societal opportunities and equalities. Finally, some have promoted queer theory within social work seeking to challenge norms and assumptions based on heteronormativity and notion of sexual identities as static phenomena (Hicks, 2008b; MacKinnon, 2011; McPhail, 2004). Together all of them argue for a deeper engagement with the ways in which individuals experience social marginalization and other challenges through intersections between sexuality and ethnicity, gender, health status, abilities and class.

Social work teaching about sexuality

The first papers to discuss social work teaching about sexuality emerged in the 1970s. Tanner (1974) and Matek (1977) were the first to suggest a methodology for teaching human sexuality in social work based on their own experience. Influenced by the work of Kinsey et al (1953; 1948) and Masters and Johnson (1966) both of them stressed the importance of knowledge about the range of human sexual behavior and sexual problems, and attitudes that intrude on professional understanding in this area. Since then there have been very few papers that offer a specific educational approach to social work teaching in this area.

The emerging new conceptualization of sexuality in social work from the last decade is mirrored in a number of papers about teaching. Dunk (2007) suggests the PLISSIT model as a pedagogical framework for teaching everyday sexuality. Ballan (2008) argues for the importance of the social model of disability in teaching sexuality. Morton, Jeyasingham and Hicks (2013) offer an example of class activity to explore the ways in which social interactions work to produce forms of sexual knowledge. And Nothdurfter and Nagy (2017) highlight the usefulness of a queer perspective to teaching LGBT issues in social work in order to promote a reflexive understanding and challenge heteronormativity. These are all important papers that offer a new way of teaching sexuality in social work from a critical perspective.

Yet, each of these papers focuses on a very specific model or activity. Whereas our aim is to offer a pedagogical strategy that is both theoretical and practical and offer a wide critical perspective on sex and sexuality as important for any area of social work practice. First, we present our pedagogical perspective; a critical perspective. We find a critical perspective useful in developing critical thinking that challenges taken-for-granted assumptions and ways of addressing sexuality. Social work is located in the intersection between the private sphere and the public and political spheres. In this sense, social work cannot be limited to an individualising frame of reference but need to critically engage with assumptions, discourses and institutions that structure society and everyday struggles (Nothdurfter & Nagy, (2017).

Second, we present six topics that we see as key for teaching sex and sexuality critically in social work: 1. Sexuality in social work fields; 2. Sexuality as a social constructed phenomenon; 3. Categorizations and sexual identity; 4. Structural based privileges and disadvantages; 5. Reproduction of power asymmetries through microaggressions; 6. Expanding the conception of sexuality in social work. After introducing each topic, we recommend suitable literature and critical questions that can be used as a basis for critical reflections in the classroom about social work theory and practices. We define critical questions as questions that challenge taken-for-granted notions and power structures.

Challenging assumptions through a critical perspective

Kinsey and Masters, and Johnson, the most known sex researchers, had a mission. They wanted to free individuals' sex from social repression. Yet, from Foucault (1979) onward a new understanding of sexuality has emerged. Foucault (1979) claimed that society produces different forms of knowledge, through various sciences, to understand and discuss sexuality. For example, in showing that 'homosexuals' did not exist before the 19th century, he illustrated how the understanding of sexuality is produced through the lenses of discourses. Sex, sexuality and sexual expressions are understood as being produced, changed, and modified within ever-changing norms and social discourses. That is to say, though there are physical and biological processes in most sexual acts, the meaning of the act, the sexual nature of the act, feelings, thoughts, and identities related to these acts, they are constructed by available norms, discourses, concepts, categories and images. Acknowledging sexuality as socially constructed, and critically thinking through social structures, social norms and discourses, enable us to see the political aspect of sexuality. It enables us to acknowledge power relations and social stratification that shape and are shaped by the social construction of sex and sexuality (Rubin, 1984 Seidman, 2015).

Acknowledging sexuality as socially constructed rejects any universal blueprint for a 'normal' sexual experience (Tiefer, 1995). It changes the focus from trying to change or 'fix' people to fit social norms to critiquing the social and cultural conditions that shape the subjective sexual experiences of all of us. It challenges heteronormativity and the medicalization of human sexuality.

To avoid individualising frame of reference and in order to critically engage with assumptions, discourses and institutions that structure society, this article draws on various theory traditions, such as critical theory (Hurley & Taiwo, 2019), critical pedagogy (Fortunato et al., 2018), critical race theory (Aguilar-Hernández, 2020; Crenshaw, 1989), privilege theory (McIntosh, 1988, 2015; Spencer, 2017), feminist theory (Barker, 2017; Crenshaw, 1989), post-structural theory (Hurley & Taiwo, 2019) and queer theory (Nothdurfter & Nagy, 2017). Broadly speaking, these theories derived largely from post-structuralist thinking and are engaged in the analysis of structural inequalities by deconstructing dominant and oppressive discourses, and exploring the social organization of oppression, privilege and power (Hurley & Taiwo, 2019). In relation to sexuality, these theories challenge normative heterosexual ideology, by questioning taken-for-granted and essentialist categories, such as race, gender and sexual identity (Nothdurfter & Nagy, 2017).

We see a critical pedagogical perspective useful for teaching sexuality in social work since it focuses on the prevailing structures and norms that contribute to oppression, othering, discrimination, marginalization and exclusion, rather than focusing on the victims of discrimination, as if they constitute the problem (Hicks, 2008a; Kumashiro, 2000).

Over the years, a problem-oriented minority focus has nevertheless contributed to the recognition of sexual diversity and to political progress, such as the removal of discriminatory regulations (Sedgwick, 1990). Within social work, addressing minority-problems has informed the public and authorities of problems sexual minorities have (McPhail, 2004). Yet, we believe a critical approach enables analyses of societal phenomena that have far greater reach than the traditional minority-oriented social work approaches (Foucault, 1979; Hellesund, 2007; Hicks & Jeyasingham, 2016; Jeyasingham, 2008, 2014; Kumashiro, 2002; Morton et al., 2013). The aim is to develop critical thinking that link personal experiences to larger social structures and to policies of sex and sexuality.

Creating a critical thinking classroom

We define a critical thinking classroom as consisting of two basic characteristics. First, in a critical thinking classroom, questions that are seldom asked and issues that are rarely problematized are addressed. A critical-thinking classroom is therefore a classroom that critically analyzes taken-for-granted beliefs. This implies norms, values, ethics, identities, categorizations, epistemologies, social organization and institutions – in fact it implies addressing critically the very structure, socially and culturally, of society. Second, in a critical-thinking classroom, power structures and power dynamics are addressed. This enables us to explore the ways in which minorities and non-privileged people are oppressed and discriminated against.

We sympathize with Sumara and Davis (1999, p. 191) who argue that “the curriculum has an obligation to interrupt heteronormative thinking - not only to promote social justice, but to broaden possibilities for perceiving, interpreting, and representing experience”. This quote emphasizes the importance of focusing on the structures that reproduce power hierarchies. From this follows that a critical thinking classroom is an invitation to all students to think of the ‘constructedness’ of their lives in a heteronormative society (Allen, 2015). A key pedagogical point in a critically thinking classroom is that focusing on structural conditions also removes the burden that minority students often otherwise have, by consistently explaining or defending their values and experiences of discrimination.

We recommend two pedagogical strategies as a good starting point for a critical classroom.

First, we recommend to make extensive use of student-active methods. Active methods, such as critical discussions in class of the literature and critical questions can enable students to work critically through their own understandings. The purpose for the students is to learn how power structures and discourses are reproduced, both in society in general, within social work, and personally. This constitutes the work that is required for repetitive patterns to break (Kumashiro, 2000).

Second strategy is teacher's self-positioning. Our main pedagogical advice to teachers is to role-model oneself in ways that reflects critical ways of addressing sexuality, or as Conrad and Crawford (1998, p. 160) put it: “… a role model who plays.” As such, the role of the teacher is to teach through practicing and performing. Teaching should not be understood as passively transforming 'knowledge', but rather in terms of performance. As Noy (2013, p. 7) argues, in relation to teaching other topics, the class and the field "are social sites that are (inter)linked by the people who move between them, the practices they perform, and the ideologies they embody". Hence, teacher's self-position and relationships with the students are key to perform a different way of being. A positioning in the classroom that, on the other hand, in various ways confirms dominant minority- and problem-orientated understandings undermines a course's critical focus. When the teacher positions in accordance with a critical perspective, where questions, discussions and reflections in relation to the production and reproduction of power structures are central, this positively contributes to learning critical thinking.

It is important to facilitate conversations in the classroom where the wide range of understandings regarding sexual experiences and identities can be expressed. Yet, teaching sexuality using critical pedagogy can raise two major challenges.

First, as a result of making visible power structures, conflict in the classroom, cognitively, epistemologically and relationally, can be expected (Conrad & Crawford, 1998). Courses that critically address sexuality “might deny students a sense of satisfaction, prompting polite disagreement, eye-rolling, or outright hostility from students confronted by critical perspectives that seek to trouble rather than to reassure” (Alexander, 2012, pp. 59-60). Rather than being a sign of something that has gone wrong pedagogically, affects such as discomfort, frustration, and anger might rather point us to students’ desires that ought to be discussed rather than satisfied (Alexander, 2012). Such responses can occur in a classroom with critical thinking when students’ taken-for-granted structural privileges are problematized. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) suggest that instead of giving equal time for all narratives, in order to be “fair”, they argue for restricting dominant narratives and making space for marginalized perspectives. And as Rom (1998, p. 407) states about conflicts and critical thinking: “If critical-thinking, imagination and individuality are to flourish in classrooms, teachers need to manage conflict, not prohibit it.”

Second, discussions about sex and sexuality can be embarrassing as sex is a personally lived and embodied experience for both the teacher and the students. Here again, we suggest not to avoid the discomfort or ignore it. Rather we should acknowledge the embarrassment as related to our choice to resist the social taboo around sex and sexuality. We should think of embarrassment as a 'political' emotion we are choosing to experience in order to renegotiate our perspectives, norms and representations. In our discomfort lies the opportunity for learning (Lavie-Ajayi, 2016). Therefore, rather than being a ‘safe space’, where teachers rule out conflict and discomfort, we argue for a ‘brave space’, where students are encouraged “to be brave in exploring content that pushes them to the edges of their comfort zones to maximize learning” (Arao & Clemens, 2013, p. 143).

The following sections support our pedagogical perspective by including specific suggestions for curriculum content through six topics we see as important in teaching about sexuality in social work.

1. Sexuality in social work fields

It is important for social work students to be prepared to proactively address issues of sexuality and support the overall well-being of their clients through direct services or macro work. To help connect this understanding of everyday sexuality (Dunk, 2007), let’s consider potential ways sexuality could manifest. Clients could include the youth who discloses sexual abuse to a trusted community activist; the 45-year-old transwoman who seeks support from the hospital social worker regarding positively negotiating her sexual life post-cancer; the nursing home social worker who is asked to create an agency policy regarding privacy after a 73-year-old male Alzheimer’s patient masturbates publicly; the school social worker who is working with a gay teen who struggles with social anxiety, but wants very much to start dating; or the gay male couple in need for assistance due to their adopted daughter. Given the potential diversity in cultural contexts, personal experiences and values, and given the lack of knowledge about sexuality from the education system, discussions about sexuality can be challenging for social workers, their clients, and social work faculty.

Even if social workers do not plan to work with sexuality issues specifically, they need to be prepared to work constructively with any issues their clients, communities, or agencies present. Bywater and Jones (2007) state that social workers need to be trained to respond in a client-centered, professional, and knowledgeable manner when their clients present sexuality-related issues. The social worker does not need to be an expert in sexuality issues. However, the social worker can build trust with the client through demonstrating a comfort level and willingness to research and discuss the sexuality information the client needs (Lindemann, 1988).

As humans we will always live with personal bias. Therefore, social work must provide for opportunities for emerging social workers to become aware of their bias, challenge their bias, and make a plan to professionally balance their personal beliefs and addressing their clients' needs (Schaub et al., 2017).

Literature recommendations[1]:

Dunk, P. (2007). Everyday Sexuality and Social Work: Locating Sexuality in Professional Practice and Education

Galarza, J., & Anthony, B. (2015). Sexuality Social Justice and Social Work.

Hicks, S. (2008a). Thinking through Sexuality

Hylton, M. E. (2006). Queer in Southern MSW Programs: Lesbian and Bisexual Women Discuss Stigma Management

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[1] Complete references to the literature recommendations in the article are in the reference list.

Jeyasingham, D. (2008). Knowledge/Ignorance and the Construction of Sexuality in Social Work Education

Rugkåsa, M., & Ylvisaker, S. (2019). From culturalisation to complexity – a critical view on the cultural competence discourse in social work

Røthing, Å., & Svendsen, S. H. B. (2010). Homotolerance and Heterosexuality as Norwegian Values

Schaub, J., Willis, P., & Dunk-West, P. (2017). Accounting for Self, Sex and Sexuality in UK Social Workers' Knowledge Base: Findings from an Exploratory Study

Trotter, J., Brogatzki, L., Duggan, L., Foster, E., & Levie, J. (2016). Revealing Disagreement and Discomfort through Auto-ethnography and Personal Narrative

Critical questions:

- Have you ever discussed issues related to sexuality in your professional role (for example in field placement)?
- Have you ever felt that you should discuss issues related to sexuality in your professional role but you did not?
- What are the challenges or barriers for you in discussing issues related to sexuality in your professional role?
- What kind of emotions arise for you when there is a discussion of sexuality?
- What kind of individual and social effects can strategies of tolerance, acceptance, affirmative action, and cultural competence have, in light of sexual power structures?

2. Sexuality as a social constructed phenomenon

A key idea to explore throughout a course about sexuality is the notion that our experience and knowledge of sexuality is socially, linguistically, discursively, politically, culturally and historically constructed.

Society not only limits and restricts our sexual expressions, feelings, and actions, but also encourages and molds them (Tiefer, 1995). All social institutions, such as the media, education system, religious, legal, medical, and mental health system, take part, explicitly and implicitly, in the construction and strengthening of sexual norms. These can, but more rarely, challenge sexual norms. One example, key to social work, is the DSM: the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The DSM has three sections that take active roles in constructing sexual norms: Sexual Dysfunctions (such as premature ejaculation and female orgasmic disorder), Paraphilic Disorder (such as fetishism, sadism, masochism, exhibitionism) and Gender Dysphoria. Sexual Dysfunctions and Paraphilic Disorder are conceptualized based on the deviation from what is considered to be normal sexual functioning and conduct (Walker & Robinson, 2012). These lists of pathologies strengthen a social construction of sexual and normality as correct genital performance and promote it as natural, universal, and healthy. At the same time, it constructs any deviation from it as an individual psychological or physiological malfunction. It ignores political and personal sexual power, social stratification, relational aspects and cultural variation (Tiefer, 2001). In addition, in the past homosexuality was also defined as a disorder in the DSM and was only completely removed in 1987 (Rogler, 1997). The DSM is but one example of a social institution that constructs a sexual hierarchy, that function in much the same way as do ideological systems of racism, by rationalizing the well-being of the privileged and pathologizing the non-privileged (Foucault, 1979; Rubin, 1984).

Literature recommendations:

Ashline, J. & McKay, K. (2017). Content analysis of patient voices at the FDA's "female sexuality dysfunction patient-focused drug development public meeting"

Foucault, M. (1979). The history of sexuality: An introduction

Ingraham, C. (2016). One is not born a bride: How weddings regulate heterosexuality

Irvin, J., & McKay, K. (2016). Top 10 Things Social Workers Need To Know About Human Sexuality. * please note critical question below

McPhail, B. A. (2004). Questioning Gender and Sexuality Binaries

Rubin, G. (1984). Thinking sex: Notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality

Simon, W., & Gagnon, J. H. (2003). Sexual scripts: Origins, influences and changes

Tepper, M. S. (2000). Sexuality and disability: The missing discourse of pleasure

Tiefer, L. (2001). A new view of women's sexual problems: Why new? Why now?

Critical questions:

- What systems have influenced your knowledge and understanding of sex and sexuality?
- How do sexuality categorizations affect ways of understanding sexuality?
- Which people, perspectives, and systems in power decide what sexual behaviors, fantasies, and desires are healthy and unhealthy?

- Language is constantly changing and evolving. One of the papers listed above utilized the phrase "biological sex". Today it is more appropriate to use the phrase "sex assigned at birth". Why do you think this differentiation is important?
- What are the potential benefits and risks of medicalizing sexual function into healthy and unhealthy; normal and abnormal? Who benefits financially from this medicalization?

- Are disabled people (whether physical, intellectual, developmental or mental health) included in your perspectives of sexuality? If not, why? What (or who) has shaped your understanding of sexuality as only for able-bodied individuals? Why is it important for social workers to challenge ableism, especially in the context of sexuality?
- Who benefits from discourses that address problematic aspects of sexual minorities?

3. Categorizations and sexual identities

There is more variety than LGBT. When societies centralize heterosexual perspectives as the default, we not only ignore and isolate the wide variety of LGBTQIA+ lives, but also ignore the fluidity and variety of sexuality, and as a result limit everyone's possibility to explore various sexual expressions. In our classrooms we must de-centralize one set of expectations for sexuality identification, and centralize the variety of lived experiences, intimacy and partnering, and expressing our identities.

Living within societies and cultures that are heteronormative means that for most of us, we assume someone is heterosexual and monogamous until they tell us otherwise. Anyone that does not conform to the 'normative' sexual transcript, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, a-sexual, polyamorous, and BDSM are, due to heteronormativity, culturally enforced to 'come out of the closet' and declare themselves as such. These assumptions are based on essentialist/biological perspectives on sexual identity. But identity is shaped by many factors in our lived experience. Sexuality is not only identities within an individual but also political categories that mold social stratification (Hellesund, 2007; Rubin, 1984). A personal concept of identification develops as the individual interacts with peers, family, and multiple systems of school, work, religion, government policy, media, and health.

The identification of sexuality also develops throughout a person's life and alongside a person's additional identities of health, disability, race, gender, ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status.

Literature recommendations:

DePalma, R., & Atkinson, E. (2006). The sound of silence: Talking about sexual orientation and schooling

Francis, M. (2012). On the myth of sexual orientation: Field notes from the personal, pedagogical, and historical discourses of identity

Hellesund, T. (2007). Deadly identities? Homosexuality, adolescence and parasuicide

Hylton, M. E. (2005). Heteronormativity and the experiences of lesbian and bisexual women as social work students

Rumens, N. (2015). Is your workplace gay-friendly? Current issues and controversies

van Anders , S.M. (2015). Beyond sexual orientation: Integrating gender/sex and diverse sexualities via sexual configurations theory

Critical questions: (based on Kroehle, 2018)

- In your daily life,
    - do you assume someone is heterosexual until they tell you differently?
    - do you assume someone is monogamous in their partnering until they tell you differently?
- How do you begin to alter these initial assumptions? Do I challenge the assumptions of others, and have courageous conversations with friends, family members, and colleagues?
- Can we incorporate using more neutral terms, such as neutral pronouns (e.g. they/them) or when referring to relationships (e.g. partner(s)), for parenting (e.g. co-parents, instead of mother/father)? Would this reduce our bias?

- How does one’s sexual identity interact with other core identities? Do some identities provide a buffer when other identities are targeted by society?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of the argument for a stable/static sexual identity?
- In what ways can you challenge ableism within sexuality in your social work classrooms, in your field placement, and in your professional career?
- In what ways does the Sexual Configurations Theory (van Anders, 2015) challenge and expand your understanding of sexual identity?

In a critical perspective, it is essential to explore different ways social stratification and inequality work. Two key aspects are important to discuss in class: structural privileges and disadvantages, and microaggression.

4. Structural based privileges and disadvantages

Power systems, such as racism, sexism, heterosexism and ableism enable some groups to exert control over other groups, by limiting their rights and freedom. Hence, it is important to discuss in class power structures and power dynamics between privileged and non-privileged statuses.

Within privilege theory (McIntosh, 1988, 2015), there are two basic characteristics of what are referred to as privileges and disadvantages. First, privileges and disadvantages are unearned. They are not a result of meritocracy, but of institutionalized power hierarchies. Accordingly to this, we define privileges as unearned, often unconscious or taken for granted, benefits that are denied to others simply because of the groups they belong to. Second, another defining aspect of these statuses is that they are mutually interdependent, in that someone's privileges are inextricably linked to someone else's disadvantages. To understand oppression, it is therefore necessary to explore privileges (Abrams & Gibson, 2007). It is a fundamental point of privilege theory that privileged groups benefit from discrimination because privileges are reproduced as an effect of discrimination. The privileges one has at the expense of those who have the disadvantages must therefore be examined.

An example of heterosexual privilege is when heterosexual identified persons are not identified or labeled — politically, socially, or otherwise, by their sexual orientation. No one questions the 'normality' of heterosexuality nor believes it was 'caused' by psychological trauma, sin, or abuse. Heterosexual identified persons do not have to fear that family, friends, or co-workers will find out about their sexual orientation, and that their knowing will have negative consequences.

When power structures are not addressed, the assumption of the privileged position as the 'hidden' center is maintained (Abrams & Gibson, 2007). An example of this is when the 'culturally sensitive practitioner' is expected to know how to do culturally sensitive practices, but remains immune to having to ask why the need exists (Baltra-Ulloa, 2016). When almost all the focus on sexuality within social work is on the non-privileged, this illustrates how social work to a great extent is a normalizing practice.

Addressing structural privileges and disadvantages shifts focus from the problems the 'others' have. For many this can help reduce and eliminate feelings of shame that individualistic- and minority-oriented approaches may help maintain, when power structures are not addressed.

Literature recommendations:

Feigenbaum, E. F. (2007). Heterosexual Privilege: The Political and the Personal

McIntosh, P. (1988). White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack

McIntosh, P. (2015). Extending the Knapsack: Using the White Privilege Analysis to Examine Conferred Advantage and Disadvantage

Shelton, J., Kroehle, K., & Andia, M. M. (2019). The Trans Person is not the Problem: Brave Spaces and Structural Competence as Educative Tools for Trans Justice in Social Work

Critical questions: (based on Kroehle, 2018)

- Do I hold privilege around my sexuality that impacts the space I'm in? Do I hold power because of them?
- What power structures exist in my world based on sexuality?
- Is the space I move through structured for straight people, while special accommodations are made for LGBTQ-people, or does the space itself not make assumptions?
- Am I an active or passive participant in a status quo? If straight people hold most of the positions of power in my world, do I question why things look as they do?
- What power do I gain because of my identities? What power do I stand to lose? Whose power am I taking?
- Do I hold privilege around my abilities that impacts the space I am in? Do I work to make sure that the spaces I participate in are accessible spaces for social work students, social workers, and clients who are disabled?

4. Reproduction of power asymmetries through microaggression

The reproduction of power asymmetries is often done in subtle ways. The concept of microaggression captures actions that often goes unnoticed, not least by those holding a privileged position, but which can have a negative impact for the target persons. As social workers, we need to develop an awareness of the possibility of microaggression and the impact of such behavior.

The term “microaggression” was coined by psychiatrist and professor Chester M. Pierce in 1970 (Sue, 2010). While the term since then has had a varying scientific popularity, it experienced a rebirth in relation to research on race and ethnicity, mainly due to Derald Wing Sue. Sue (2010, p. xvi) defines microaggressions as “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership”. He (Sue, 2010) describes microaggressions as statements that repeat or affirm stereotypes about the minority group or subtly demean its members. Such comments position the dominant culture as normal. Although microaggressions can occur out of misunderstandings, microaggressions often originates in what we are taught (Spencer, 2017, p. 3): “Microaggressions are learned through the dominant culture, which subtly teaches us to suspect, distrust, fear, and claim superiority in morals, behaviors, values, beliefs, and rationale over others. It is what some call “common sense” […].” In this sense, microaggressions are not understood as expressions of negative characteristics in some individuals, but as mechanisms that maintain the status quo, and expressions of how we have internalized dominant norms.

Examples of microaggressions toward queers ("queer" is here referred to persons who are gay, lesbian, bisexual) are: ‘I am not being homophobic, you are just being too insensitive.’ ‘I have nothing against gay people.’ ‘Why don’t you ever wear dresses?’ ‘Are you a man or a woman?’ ‘I have a cousin like you.’ ‘Why do you have to demonstrate?’ Being stared at. Being shouted at, and whistled toward, e.g. when showing affection for same-sex-partner. In a critical approach, the focus is not on the transgressor, but on how such acts works to exclude and to reproduce power asymmetries.

Because of their subtle nature, microaggressions typically result in a subjective experience that is often less discernible by those external to the event (Nadal, 2013). Also for this reason, it is important to study such everyday marginalization mechanisms; they not only have significance in themselves, but also the lack of recognition of them needs to be addressed (Sue, 2010).

The Council on Social Work Education in the USA produced a guide for addressing microaggressions in social work classrooms. Steps suggested are to notice, acknowledge, make space, and engage group (Byers et al., 2020; McInroy, 2019). We highly recommend exploring further their recommendations for your classroom.

Literature recommendation:

Byers, D.S., McInroy, L.B., Craig, S.L., Slates, S., Kattari, S.K. (2020). Naming and addressing homophobic and transphobic microaggressions in social work classrooms

McInroy, L. B., Byers, D. S., Kattari, S. K., & CSWE Council on Sexual Orientation and Gender Expression. (2019). *The NAME Steps: How to name and address anti-LGBTQIA2S+ microaggressions in social work classrooms*

Morton, J., Jeyasingham, D., & Hicks, S. (2013). The Social Work of Sexuality: Rethinking Approaches to Social Work Education

Spencer, M. S. (2017). Microaggressions and Social Work Practice, Education, and Research

Sue, D. W. (2010). Microaggressions in everyday life: Race, gender, and sexual orientation

Critical questions:

- How do I respond when I witness microaggressions in class discussions or in my professional settings?
- How can I actively learn more so as to not perpetuate microaggressions myself?
- If microaggressions are directed at me personally how would I like others who witness to respond?

- In what ways do the intersections of disability, body size, illness, race, gender identity, age compound in the social constructions of normal and can result in multi-layered microaggressions?

6. Expanding the conception of sexuality in social work

One of the most pervasive constructions of sexuality in western culture is the construction of sexuality as a dangerous and destructive force (Rubin, 1984). In social work, as in sex education and many other professional discussions of sex, we tend to discuss sexuality only in relation to risk, pathology, illness, and discrimination. Instead, we should expand our lens, acknowledge the positive and pleasurable aspects of sex and discuss sexuality as a normative and regulatory aspect of our lives, relationships, identity, behavior and thoughts. Such an approach, anchored in various feminist, queer, and critical theories, can highlight concepts of wellbeing and agency, link power and pleasure (for example, discussing the orgasmic gap between men and women), encourage critique of terms (for example, attraction, consent, sexual categories), challenge heteronormative sexual scripts, and attend more to the embodied and embedded aspect of sexuality (Dodd & Tolman, 2017; Rowntree, 2014). To do so we need to attend to embodied material complexities of service users' lived social experience, whose subjectivities are shaped by representations about age, gender, ability, class, race and sexuality.

Literature recommendation:

Barker, J. (Ed.) (2017). Critically sovereign: Indigenous gender, sexuality, and feminist studies

Chappell, P. & de Beer, M. (Eds.) (2019). Diverse Voices of Disabled Sexualities in the Global South

Dodd, S. J., & Tolman, D. (2017). Reviving a Positive Discourse on Sexuality within Social Work

Hicks, S., & Jeyasingham, D. (2016). Social Work, Queer Theory and After: A Genealogy of Sexuality Theory in Neo-Liberal Times

Hicks, S. (2008b). What Does Social Work Desire?

Loeser, C., Pini, B., & Crowley, V. (2017). Disability and sexuality: Desires and pleasures

McCave, E., Shepard, B., & Winter, V. R. (2014). Human Sexuality as a Critical Subfield in Social Work

Nobiss, C. (2019). What I want you to know about these abortion bans, as an Indigenous woman?

Tepper, M. S. (2000). Sexuality and disability: The missing discourse of pleasure

Williams, D. J., Prior, E., & Wegner, J. (2013). Resolving Social Problems Associated with Sexuality: Can a "Sex-Positive" Approach Help?

Critical questions:

- What are my beliefs, biases, and values regarding bodies and pleasure?
- Are there certain bodies (because of ability or age or illness) that I believe should have more or less access to sexual pleasure?
- What are my beliefs, biases, and values regarding reproduction and parenting?
- What are my beliefs, biases, and values regarding bodily autonomy and making decisions regarding personal reproduction?
- What can the international social work profession do to support global Indigenous concepts of sexuality, and partnering that have been deeply targeted from 500+ years of colonialism, settler domination, and white supremacy?

Conclusion

When it comes to sex and sexuality there are many important topics for social workers: sexual development throughout the life span, sexual communities, sexual agency, sexuality and disability, sexual abuse, pornography, the sex industry, and much more. Yet, expanding the discussion about sexuality in social work does not simply mean adding more topics. Rather, we are arguing in this paper, that teaching about sexuality should enable a discussion that overcome the social taboo barrier and develop critical thinking about sexuality. Critical pedagogy's focus on social justice and social critique provides an opportunity for meaningful considerations of the intersection of sexuality with race, class, function ability and other factors that serve to underscore and sustain power imbalances and inequalities. In this paper, we focus on six topics that enable the students to understand how sexuality can become basis for discrimination and inequality.

Over the past decade a number of scholars have called to expand the discussion in social work about sexuality as a key aspect of human lives, relationship and social identity in general, and not only a 'problem' for specific groups of service users (Dodd & Tolman, 2017; Hicks, 2008a; Morton et al., 2013; Shelton et al., 2019; Willis et al., 2016). Social work schools should reflect this idea by incorporating sexuality into their teaching in a meaningful and appropriate way. This will serve to prepare students to proactively address issues of sexuality and support the overall well-being of all their clients, while welcoming the diversity of future clients and current students.

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