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Teaching Forensic Paraphilia in Undergraduate and Graduate Human Sexuality: A Note from the Field

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Part of being a social work professor is teaching human sexuality, including paraphilias. Approaching such emotionally charged topics intellectually can be particularly difficult when teaching at undergraduate and graduate levels in higher education. Students coming from different parts of the nation, different parts of the planet; students coming from a diverse array of ethical and ideological backgrounds, can take these lessons in different ways, ways in which professors may never intend. Employing a point-counterpoint philosophy to explore the ethics related to sexual diversity and inclusion can encourage students to consider counterpoints to their points of view, focused not on agreement, but understanding. The aim isn't for students to change who they are, but to get to know who they are at a deeper level by covering divisive topics from a variety of opposing and conflicting perspectives. For professors, it's important to understand that divisive topics are divisive for a reason, and will likely never be universally considered.

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INTRODUCTION

Part of being a social work professor is teaching human sexuality, including paraphilias, defined as persistent and recurrent sexual interests, urges, fantasies, or behaviors of marked intensity involving objects, activities, or even situations that are atypical in nature (Fisher & Marwaha, 2020). Approaching such emotionally charged topics intellectually can be particularly difficult when teaching at undergraduate and graduate levels in higher education. Students coming from different parts of the nation, different parts of the planet; students coming from a diverse array of ethical and ideological backgrounds, can take these lessons in different ways, ways in which professors may never intend.

One solution, the path of least resistance, would be to eliminate all material related to human sexuality from higher education curricula, assuming that students will find information on their own if they are curious. However, the same can be said about most information, so would this standard be applied to other divisive topics like race, gender, and politics?

Another solution is to tread carefully, considering the implications of every word of every sentence during these lessons, often prioritizing emotional safety over intellectual exploration. Walking the tightrope between political correctness and brutal honesty about paraphilias in human sexuality can be a better solution, though still relying on students' natural curiosity in finding information on their own to connect the dots that their professors have laid.

A purely intellectual environment, particularly in teaching divisive topics like paraphilias in human sexuality, would require a brave space with presumed trigger warnings. However, a purely intellectual environment fails to acknowledge the emotional triggers for individual students who may “power through” these lessons, only to later be traumatized by them.

Ultimately, there is no perfect solution to teaching paraphilia in human sexuality. If professors choose to teach on the topic, they'll have to consider their own ethical and ideological guidelines to determine what, and how much, to teach.

Paraphilic Content

Teaching paraphilia in human sexuality goes beyond legal and socially acceptable forms of sexuality like heterosexuality, gay and lesbian sexuality, bisexuality, asexuality, demisexuality, pansexuality, sapiosexuality, etc. It should be noted that although some of these categories of legal and socially acceptable forms of sexuality were once considered paraphilias, such is no longer the case. As the Overton Window of legal and socially acceptable ideas shifts (Beck, 2010), students are challenged to consider which paraphilias that are considered illegal and/or socially unacceptable in the present may not be in the future. This is where conversations can get difficult and triggering. Intellectual exploration requires an acknowledgment of nuance, though nuance is particularly difficult for emotionally charged topics.

The concept of pedophilia as a paraphilia, for example, has been a subject of popular debate within academic circles, with some asking if they are born this way (Richards, 2018) and some others seeking to normalize the mental identity of attraction towards children, categorizing it as a sexual orientation (Nelson, 2020). Distinguished Professor at the State University of New York – Fredonia, Dr. Stephen Kershner, authored *Pedophilia and Adult-Child Sex, A Philosophical Analysis* (2015), in which he questions if adult-child sex is morally and legally wrong. Dr. Allyn Walker, faculty member with the Moore Center for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse in the Bloomberg School of Public Health at Johns Hopkins University, authored *A Long, Dark Shadow: Minor-Attracted People and Their Pursuit of Dignity* (2021), in which they stress the importance of differentiating between legally offending and legally non-offending minor-attracted people (MAP), in addition to using “minor-attracted person/people” instead of “pedophile” since the former is less-stigmatized and MAP-advocacy groups like B4U-ACT (n.d.) have advocated for the use of this terminology. Dr. Walker has

also written on the use of queer-spectrum identity labels among minor-attracted people in the *Journal of Homosexuality* (2019), potentially blurring the line between legal and socially acceptable forms of sexuality and illegal and/or socially unacceptable forms of sexuality. In addition to B4U-ACT (n.d.), other resources exist for MAPs, including Virped (n.d.), The Global Prevention Project (n.d.), and Prostasia Foundation (n.d.), which has a support club for minor-attracted people named “MAP Support Club.”

Books similar to the ones Dr. Kershner and Dr. Walker have written are nothing new; historical texts speaking about the paraphilia of pedophilia have been around for quite some time, with some of the most cited being *Man and Woman, Boy and Girl: Differentiation and Dimorphism of Gender Identity from Conception to Maturity* (Money & Ehrhardt, 1972), *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1998), and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 2003).

Mirjam Heine, a German medical student, stated in her Ted Talk that “pedophilia is an unchangeable sexual orientation, just like... heterosexuality” (Nelson, 2020). Author, Sara Jahnke (2018), states that “the idea that pedophilia may be best understood as a sexual orientation, which, akin to homo- or heterosexuality, starts early and remains stable over the course of life, is now gaining acceptance amongst the scientific community” (p. 144).

The local, state, national, and international legal arenas are no strangers to the topic of pedophilia. From California’s SB-145: Sex Offenders Registration (2020) to Florida’s SB-1834: Parental Rights in Education (2022) to Latham v. 1953 Tr. (2020) to the United Nations’ International Commission of Jurists (2023) stating, “sexual conduct involving persons below the domestically prescribed minimum age of consent to sex may be consensual in fact, if not in law.” (p.22). Colorado officials have even dropped the term “sex offender,” saying it’s too negative (2021).

Pedophilia is just one of many paraphilias taught in human sexuality. Other illegal and/or socially unacceptable paraphilias taught include biastophilia, raptophilia, somnophilia, lithosexuality, etc. These paraphilias are just as emotionally charged, making for a difficult environment for intellectual exploration.

Biastophilia, or in forensic sexology terms, paraphilic serial rape (Money, 1990) is deemed the correct technical term (Knecht, 2014), however, raptophilia is gaining popularity as a synonymous alternative term to biastophilia (Traesaden 2010). Somnophilia is a paraphilia characterized by the desire to have sex with an unconscious human who is unable to respond (Lauerma, 2016). Lithosexuality is a newer term in academia, defined as sexual attraction toward those who do not reciprocate sexual interest (Daigle-Orians, 2023; Wayman, 2022).

These paraphilias can blur the distinction between sexual paraphilia and criminal behavior (Pettigrew, 2019), which calls into question the degree of inclusivity that exists in society today and how the Overton Window of inclusivity has shifted and could shift in the future.

Considerations for the Delivery of Paraphilic Content

Teaching human sexuality in a politically charged climate is no easy task. As reported by both students and professors alike, teaching paraphilias in human sexuality can add to the difficulty and discomfort felt by all. Special considerations must be taken when approaching such topics, including added preparation and time for debriefing.

Professors should prepare for students to be triggered by conversations about the Overton Window and paraphilias: what was a paraphilia but is no longer; what is a paraphilia but may not be one day. Students may begin to question where they draw their lines of sexual diversity; should they be more inclusive? less inclusive? has society gone too far? not far enough? They’ll naturally question the limitations of “can’t help who they are attracted to” (Grady, Levenson, Mesias, Kavanagh, & Charles, 2019).

For some students, discussing the topics of pedophilia, biastophilia, raptophilia, somnophilia, and lithosexuality as paraphilias, can be seen as minimizing or downplaying the severity of criminal behaviors. This can be the case even for professors intending to do the opposite: bringing attention to the importance of society keeping itself in check from sexual hyper-inclusivity to the degree of harm. Reconciling between considering physical arousal as an involuntary response to stimuli and physical arousal as a criminal behavior can be a daunting task.

Students may resist the idea that there is so much academic literature on these and other paraphilias. Their hesitance to acknowledge the breadth and depth of peer-reviewed paraphilic literature can be addressed through scholastic database searches, but this can pose a new existential crisis of seeing a world they never knew existed. What can this newfound trauma do to a student at the undergraduate level? or at the graduate level?

Ultimately, it may be worthwhile to challenge students to think critically about sexual diversity and inclusion. Ethics and morality will be questioned as ignorance and apathy could be preferred options over knowing that such paraphilias exist.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The course description can generally be the first line of defense, warning students that discussing paraphilias in human sexuality can be triggering. The first few sessions of class discussions can also set the standard for brave spaces in search of intellectual exploration, sometimes at the expense of emotional comfort. Employing a point-counterpoint philosophy (Alam, 2023) to explore the ethics related to sexual diversity and inclusion can encourage students to consider counterpoints to their points of view, focused not on agreement, but understanding. The aim isn't for students to change who they are, but to get to know who they are at a deeper level by covering divisive topics from a variety of opposing and conflicting perspectives.

Finally, professors teaching paraphilias in human sexuality can expect to have their student evaluations impacted, though not always negatively. Many students may be infatuated with a professor daring to discuss the breadth and depth of peer-reviewed paraphilic literature. Other students may be infuriated by a professor daring to discuss the breadth and depth of peer-reviewed paraphilic literature. Perhaps a good rule of thumb is to aim not to be perfect, but rather to have more positive student evaluations than negative student evaluations, understanding that divisive topics are divisive for a reason, and will likely never be universally considered.

The shifting Overton Window of paraphilias can be triggering to professors and students alike. History as the best predictor of the future indicates that the Overton Window of paraphilias will continue to shift in perpetuity. What was a paraphilia but is no longer? What is a paraphilia but may not be one day? Where do we draw our lines of “can't help who they are attracted to” (Grady, Levenson, Mesias, Kavanagh, & Charles, 2019)? Perhaps we should practice greater care about what areas of sexual diversity we aim to be inclusive towards rather than deeming sexual diversity and inclusion universally positive.

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