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Book Review: *The Psychology of Human Sexuality*, 2nd ed., by Justin J. Lehmiller

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Sex education is important both to individuals and to overall public health outcomes. In the United States, sex education curriculum is not guided by any federal standards, meaning materials and approaches vary widely. Drawing inspiration and evidence from countries with successful sexuality education standards, we know that comprehensive, evidence-based methods are the most effective for improving health outcomes across myriad domains. Materials that are guided by this standard of empirical basis should be identified and used in conjunction with other tools for providing responsible and effective sex education. This is a review of one such undergraduate textbook: *The Psychology of Human Sexuality* (Lehmiller, 2018). Lehmiller's (2018) textbook is not only guided by a rigorous commitment to empirical basis and medical accuracy, but features an understanding of the roles of psychological, social, and cultural issues in sexual development and behavior that other sexuality textbooks lack. Additionally, the intentional tone of sex-positivity and attempts at inclusivity present in this textbook set it apart from its counterparts. Benefits and shortcomings to this approach are discussed.

Keywords: book review, psychology of human sexuality, sex education, textbook

Review

Culturally and academically, the United States suffers from a lack of comprehensive, medically accurate, evidence-based sex education. A lack of federally accepted national standards dictating what must be taught, and when (Guttmacher Institute, 2021), means that many American adults never get the sex education they deserve. Poor sex education has impacts beyond those to the individual. Sex education is a matter of public health, a lack of which contributes to adverse outcomes (Weaver, Smith, & Kippax, 2005) like increased rates of unintended pregnancy (Williams & Bonner, 2006), the spread of STIs (Fonner, Armstrong, Kennedy, O'Reilly, & Sweat, 2014; Vivancos, Abubakar, Phillips-Howard, & Hunter, 2013), and ignorance about sexual diversity that increases stigma and exacerbates poor health outcomes (Bezreh, Weinberg, & Edgar, 2012; Valdiserri, Holtgrave, Poteat, & Beyrer, 2018). The importance of sex education means that, when it is taught, it is imperative that the curriculum be held to exacting standards. *The Psychology of Human Sexuality*, Second Edition, (Lehmiller, 2018) is a textbook that goes far toward meeting those exacting standards.

This textbook features 13 illustrated chapters that each begin with an introduction, followed by a comprehensive, albeit foundational, discussion of the content. The chapters are followed by a glossary of key terms, presented in bold throughout the chapters, an index, and a complete list of references. Throughout the book there are sections called "Digging Deeper" and "Your Sexuality" that invite readers to

more thoroughly consider additional information and context related to the topics presented in the book. Each chapter closes with a summary list of the key terms used in that chapter, and a list of discussion questions. There is additional and robust content available to instructors who wish to use this in their courses, including summary PowerPoint slides, a test bank, and additional discussion content.

Like each chapter, the book also begins with an introduction, titled "Foreplay," and ends with an epilogue. Lehmiller uses both as an opportunity to address the reader about what to expect from the book, and from him as an author. In "Foreplay" Lehmiller makes it clear that his approach is "all based in science" (p. xiv) and defines his philosophy as a sex-positive researcher, educator, and author (p. xiii). He also discusses his motivation for writing a human sexuality textbook that features psychology so prominently. Previously, books dedicated to the study of human sexuality have given "short shrift" to much beyond anatomy and physiological

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development (p. xiii). This book is like other sexuality textbooks in that it provides important, medically accurate information on anatomy, contraception, and STIs. This book goes beyond other sexuality textbooks to provide empirically based information on the “roles that psychology and the social and cultural context play in shaping human behavior” (p. xiii). In the epilogue (p. 416), Lehmiller reminds the reader that no single book could possibly cover all that one needs to know about human sexuality, encouraging readers to “go out and keep learning about sex.”

Lehmiller makes good on his promise to write a sex-positive, empirically based textbook that covers not just the basics, but also includes a closer look at a diverse array of topics in identity, relationships, and behaviors (e.g., gender and sexual orientation diversity, ethical non-monogamy, fetish). He manages to present a well-organized tool that discusses myriad sensitive and unfamiliar topics in plain but intelligent language and a clear tone of open-mindedness and inclusivity. Where there is a gap in the literature, Lehmiller makes an effort to acknowledge this and explain how those gaps can be handled. Most issues of this nature are resolved by the standard of empirical basis to which each topic is held, both for inclusion and discussion. This standard of empirical basis is both the book’s greatest feature and its most notable shortcoming.

Any educator who has ever had to correct bad information about human sexuality that a student found online or heard from friends will surely welcome and appreciate this foundational textbook that is so thoroughly rooted in scientific literature and committed to medical accuracy. The citations provided cover a span of disciplines, making it easy for folks from any field to follow up on topics of interest to them personally or professionally. Because this rigorous standard is not the result of any broad accuracy mandate on the provision of sexuality education, this textbook is a shining star. However, what this textbook fails to do is carefully consider the ways that science has done disservice to some of the diverse topics and communities this same book heralds as noteworthy and valuable.

Empirical basis is an important educational standard, but it means nothing without a commitment to inclusivity and affirmation. “Empirically-based” as a standard, is necessarily limited to only what is available in empirical research. Research in all fields, and certainly in the fields involving human sexuality, has historically been dismissive of (and even harmful to) marginalized communities. To be properly comprehensive and responsible, educators should consider this, go beyond what exists in the literature, and listen to the voices of those who occupy these communities. That is something this textbook has failed to do.

Most notably, throughout the book Lehmiller adheres to language use that is scientific and, in many cases, highly medicalized. For example, despite several brief state-

ments about the diverse and non-binary nature of both sex and gender, the book still resorts to “male/female” dichotomous language throughout. Chapters are organized in terms of male vs. female, subjects compare male response/behavior/preferences to female response/behavior preferences. Furthermore, this dichotomy is presented as foundational, and conversations about diversity in gender and sex are given short shrift. When diversity discussions are included, that discussion reads like an afterthought at best, and like othering, rather than affirmation, at worst. By using language reflected in science, mental health, and medicine in favor of language used by the communities who embody these identities (i.e., the use of “transsexualism” to describe what most people living in and doing work in LGBTQ+ communities call “transgender identity”), the book contributes to stigma that medicalizes and further marginalizes members of these communities. Ideally, chapter introductions could more completely address these kinds of concerns head on, rather than burying any mention of these issues in the larger text.

Overall, this is a valuable and sex-positive contribution to academic study of the psychology of human sexuality. Educators who wish to use this book would be well advised to consult members of marginalized communities on the presentation of these topics in their courses, but as a foundational undergraduate textbook there are few available that match this text for quality and comprehensiveness.

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