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# A Path Towards Intersectionality-Informed Counseling Sexology: A Special Commentary

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It is the goal of professionals within the field of counseling sexology and sexual wellness to provide clients with clinical mental health counseling through a sex-positive and affirming framework. To do so, clinicians must pay special attention to best practices in the field, especially as it relates to historically oppressed and minoritized clients. To do so, appropriate training is required to inform care. Furthermore, clinical practice is also informed by research, making it imperative that research is conducted related to various aspects of sexual wellness and treatment. This commentary will identify and discuss sexual health and wellness priorities within the field of clinical mental health counseling to outline future directions for the field.

*Keywords:* counseling sexology, counseling, clinical mental health, future directions, commentary

## Introduction

Within the growing field of counseling sexology, a greater understanding of sexual health and wellness priorities is needed as it relates to clinical mental health counseling. This includes clinical, research, and training priorities that will allow for the provision of enhanced clinical mental health treatment for clients with sex and sexuality related concerns. To best serve clients, further attention must be paid to best practices in providing sex-positive and affirming counseling services through an intersectionality-informed lens, especially for marginalized clients (Alexander, 2019; Cardona, Farago, & Bedi, 2022; Mosher, 2017). Sex positivity generally refers to the extent to which thinking about sexuality and/or sex bring about positive or favorable thoughts, affect, attitudes, and/or evaluations (Hangen & Rogge, 2021). In regards to counseling sexology, affirming counseling refers to the provision of services that normalize clients' sexual curiosities and preferences while validating and destigmatizing clients' experiences, identities, and concerns, thereby fostering the client's ability to increase their comfort in their own sexuality (Gupta, 2019). Furthermore, increased research efforts within the clinical mental health counseling field are needed to explore the sex and sexuality-related experiences of minoritized groups, the training of sexology counselors, and the decolonization of American society's sexual expectations (Emelianchik-Key, Labarta, & Irvine, 2021). Lastly, special attention must be paid to the training provided to counselors as it relates to sexual health and wellness (Emelianchik-Key et al., 2021).

## Clinical Priorities

As counselors, it is imperative that we are prepared to provide sex-positive and affirming services to all clients seeking our services. This is especially true for specific client populations, such as those for whom sex is a cultural taboo (Montejo, 2019; Mosher, 2017). Moreover, to effectively affirm and serve our clients, we must be able to conceptualize and treat them through an intersectionality-informed lens (Alexander, 2019; Hall & Graham, 2014). In some cultures, discussions and education pertaining to sex are considered taboo, thereby potentially limiting the provision of sex education and sex-positive ideals (Hall & Graham, 2014; Montejo, 2019). Therefore, it is our duty as counselors to be intentional in providing these clients with an affirming and sex-positive framework through which they can begin to reconceptualize their view of sex and their sexuality. Within American society, for example, Black women are often hypersexualized (Chambers et al., 2021; Sydnor-Campbell, 2017) or hyper-masculinized (Douglass, 2018; Gammage, 2018) based on skin tone. More specifically, Black women are often hypersexualized due to the stereotype

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of the Black women as “Jezebel” (Leath, Jerald, Perkins, & Jones, 2021). This intersectional phenomenon is rooted in American society’s history of colonization and resulting racism and sexism (Leath et al., 2021). Being mindful and informed regarding such phenomenon may allow counselors to have an improved understanding of the experiences of Black, female-identifying clients, as well as the experiences of individuals within other minoritized identities (Leath et al., 2021). Furthermore, knowledge of a client’s experiences in society may provide valuable insight into how they perceive themselves as a sexual being, especially for clients identifying within minoritized groups, such as those with differing socioeconomic class and varying abilities (Mollen, Burnes, Lee, & Abbott, 2018).

### Research Priorities

To best inform the practices of counselors, research is needed in an array of sexuality-related areas. Further research into the experiences of individuals identifying within underrepresented groups/cultures is needed as it relates to sexology counseling (Mosher, 2017). Findings from such research may guide the practices of counselors working with this clientele by providing enhanced insight into diverse experiences related to sexuality, thereby ensuring that clients receive multiculturally-informed and affirming services (Emelanchik-Key et al., 2021; Montejo, 2019). Similarly, research exploring the relationship between intersecting minoritized identities and sexual satisfaction would benefit the field of counseling sexology (Cruz, 2021). More specifically, an increased understanding of the ways in which intersectionality relates to individuals’ sexual satisfaction would provide counselors with a better-informed framework to foster clients’ increased sexual satisfaction (Cruz, 2021). Sexual scripts, expectations, and values are often rooted in American society’s history of colonization (Meissner & Whyte, 2017). To further strengthen sexology counselors’ abilities to provide sex-positive and affirming care, additional research is also needed regarding best practices in decolonizing sexual expectations to allow for the construction of healthier sexual scripts and expectations (Hargons et al., 2021). For instance, due to colonialism, BIPOC individuals and individuals with various disabilities are often fetishized (Amin, 2017; Ebrahim, 2019). Research related to the decolonization of sex and sexuality would provide a frame of reference for counselors to aid in the deconstruction and reconstruction of the systems and schemas that foster such oppression of minoritized identity groups. Research within the field of sexology counseling and sexual wellness may not only inform the practice of current counselors but may also shape the future practices of counselors-in-training. To this end, it would behoove the field of sexology counseling to explore the extent to which counselors are trained in the treatment of sex and sexuality-related concerns (Dupkoski,

Kelchner, & Haley, 2021). Findings of such research would enlighten counseling graduate programs and professional organizations as to areas for improvement in the training of sex-positive and affirming professionals (Cardona et al., 2022; Emelanchik-Key et al., 2021).

### Training Priorities

It is imperative that we examine the training counselors receive in order to improve the sexology counseling services provided (Cardona et al., 2022; Dupkoski et al., 2021; Emelanchik-Key et al., 2021). Counselor training programs should pay special attention to the preparation of counselors-in-training to provide sex-positive services to future clients (Montejo, 2019). Furthermore, practicing counselors should seek ongoing continuing education to continuously enhance their abilities to affirm their clients’ sexual identities and provide sex-positive services (Mollen et al., 2018). To do this, it is important that counselors and future counselors are trained in the importance of identifying and acknowledging their biases and values related to sex (Sanabria & Murray, 2018). Through the identification and acknowledgement of their own sexual biases and values, the foundation is set for counselors and counselors-in training to reflect upon and develop the necessary skills to confront their biases, so they are not imposed onto clients (Sanabria & Murray, 2018). Knowledge and awareness of the roles of culture and cultural influences on one’s values and beliefs surrounding sex and sexuality are imperative in this reflexivity.

Language is an ever evolving and important aspect of the therapeutic relationship. Therefore, it is imperative that counselors-in-training and practicing counselors receive ongoing education regarding sex and sexuality-related vocabulary and terminology (Krieger, 2017). Additionally, ongoing continuing education is needed regarding the intersectionality of culture and sexuality. More specifically, sexology counselors should continuously seek and attain training that enhances their understanding of how clients’ cultures shape their perspectives, values, and beliefs regarding sex and sexuality (Buehler, 2016). Similarly, this ongoing education should include best practices for addressing sexuality-related concerns through a culturally aware and sensitive lens. Societal messages also shape individuals’ conceptualizations of sex and sexuality (Buehler, 2016). Therefore, sexology counselors must also be aware of the impacts of societal contexts and messages and be well versed in how to support clients as they deconstruct and reconstruct their views of sexuality. To partake in ongoing education, counselors and counselors-in-training must be aware of educational resources and opportunities available to them. This information can often be found through involvement in professional organizations or sex-positive community organizations to ensure that sexology counselors engage in best practices to foster client’s healthy and sex-positive conceptualizations of

sex and sexuality.

### Conclusion

As the field of counseling sexology continues to grow, it is important that researchers, educators, and clinicians are intentional in implementing an intersectionality-informed framework (Alexander, 2019; Cardona et al., 2022); Mosher, 2017). Through the intentional implementation of such a framework, counseling sexology practice, research, and training will be increasingly decolonized (Emelianchik-Key et al., 2021). As a result, clients will receive affirming, sex positive, and culturally considerate services, enhancing their mental health, and potentially, their sexual satisfaction (Cruz, 2021).

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