The Construction of Sexuality Knowledge in Human Sexuality Textbooks

Monika Stelzl and Brittany Stairs

Abstract
In this chapter, we discuss our research regarding the construction of sexuality knowledge in North American human sexuality textbooks. Feminist and social constructionist scholars argue that knowledge is negotiated in society and reflects power interests rather than being objective and universal. Informed by these feminist and constructionist approaches, we focus specifically on sexuality knowledge and conceptualise it as being socially constructed and as fashioning subjective experiences. We used discourse analysis to examine the dominant discursive themes around the organisation of textbooks’ topics as well as the content of chapters on sexual distress of twelve current North American human sexuality textbooks (introductory/survey level). In particular, we explored what discourses were present and dominant, and which ones were represented to a lesser degree or missing. Biological essentialism emerged as the principal discourse with respect to chapter organisation. Biological essentialism also dominated explanations of sexual distress and was connected to biomedical discourse around the alleviation of sexual distress. We argue that the extensive presence of biological essentialism in the construction of sexuality knowledge not only precludes alternative discourses around cultural and sexual diversities, but it also justifies existing power structures. In line with feminist approaches such as the New View Campaign, we call for expanded representations of human sexualities in current North American survey-level sexuality textbooks.

Key Words: Sexuality knowledge, discourse, feminist psychology, social constructionism, human sexuality textbooks, biological essentialism, biomedical discourse, New View of Women’s Sexual Problems.

*****

1. Introduction
A belief that knowledge reflects facts which are assumed to be objectively true is an approach that is often reflected in mainstream psychological literature. In contrast, feminist and social constructionist scholars, among others, have argued that knowledge does not exist independently of the knower but rather it is negotiated in society and, as such, it affects and is affected by history, culture, power relations, and language. In our chapter, we contend that human sexuality textbooks are actively involved in a particular construction of sexuality knowledge.
2. Construction of Sexuality Knowledge

We adopt the view that sexualities are socially constructed by way of their positions in particular historical and cultural contexts as well as through language and power. Power and language have implications for how sexualities are defined, characterised, expressed, experienced, and negotiated. For example, Brickell posits that productive power produces a particular constellation of definitions, knowledges, and meanings regarding sexuality, such as presenting heterosexuality as the normative and stable sexual orientation. Hence, in our chapter, we use the term ‘sexuality knowledge’ to reflect our contention that, in relation to sexuality, what we know and how we know is socially constructed, is intertwined with power and language, and fashions subjective experiences. In relation to productive power, the availability of specific dominant as well as dissident discourses contributes to a particular construction of sexuality knowledge which, in turn, informs a particular construction of sexuality. Discourses can be defined as meanings around a particular topic created through shared use and understanding of language. Reproductive sexuality constitutes one example of dominant discourses around sexuality. Within the discourse of reproductive sexuality, a strong emphasis is placed on family and heteronormativity. As a result, the biological and reproductive aspects of sexuality are positioned as natural and normative. Heteronormativity refers to the prevalent assumption that heterosexuality represents the natural norm of romantic and sexual attraction. In the context of the reproductive discourse, woman’s possible yet inevitable role as a mother is constructed as one of the centre-pieces of female sexuality. Gynaecology textbooks have perpetuated this discourse by frequently representing female sexuality as existing solely for reproductive purposes rather than for woman’s pleasure.

3. The Construction of Sexuality Knowledge in Human Sexuality Textbooks

Gynaecology texts are one of many ‘knowledge’ sources incorporating dominant and power-infused discourses into the construction of sexuality. The internet, television, documentaries, and books have all been acknowledged by various scholars as potent transmitters of sexuality knowledge. This sexuality knowledge is often presented and understood as objective, universal, and existing as an essential entity outside of those who experience it. In the context of sexuality education, textbooks about sexuality provide a comprehensive set of connections, themes, and discourses around sexuality, gender, love, and other topics. For example, Goettsch attempted to determine whether human sexuality textbooks sufficiently portrayed the various ways in which sexuality and society inter-connect. Goettsch argued that human sexuality textbooks emphasised themes around science via their focus on compilation of scientific data but historical and cross-cultural connections in the relation to sexuality were absent or only marginally present. This suggests that human sexuality textbooks do not account for many alternative discourses around sexuality, but rather tend to privilege and
perpetuate the current dominant discourses. Furthermore, we argue that textbooks are not neutral reflections of a particular topic yet, similarly to the conventional understanding of knowledge itself, they might be perceived as objective and representative summaries of the pertinent subject such as sexuality. Many feminist and critical scholars expressed concerns regarding the unquestionable assumption of empirical objectivity as then the various influences of power on knowledge construction go relatively unchecked.

4. Current Research

Our research has been informed by feminist and social constructionist approaches in the area of construction and production of sexuality and sexuality knowledge. Specifically, we aimed to identify and explore the predominant discourses in North American human sexuality textbooks as well as to note which discourses and themes were marginalized or absent. In this chapter, we focus on the organisation of textbook chapters and the content of chapters on sexual distress.

5. Method

To identify dominant discourses in current North American human sexuality textbooks, twelve of the most recent human sexuality textbooks from major North American publishers were examined. The textbooks were predominantly introductory/survey human sexuality texts in the area of psychology and had publishing dates between 2009 and 2013. The most recent publications were used in order to detect current discourses of sexuality. To differentiate between the textbook sample and the referenced literature, textbooks are referred to by a letter. The list of corresponding textbooks is provided in Appendix A. Our examination was guided by discourse analysis, which requires a critical reading of texts to uncover prevalent themes.

6. Analysis and Discussion

In our analysis, biological essentialism emerged as an especially salient discourse. Essentialism reflects the notion that ‘things’ have essences and these essences or forms are universal, temporally constant, and independent of the observer. The particular type of essentialism involved in the structuring of sexuality knowledge is that of biological essentialism or biological determinism. In biological essentialism, biology and its relevant aspects such as hormones, genes, and drives are perceived and presented as natural, unavoidable, and determinant of genders, orientations, and sexual functioning. In the following sections, we explain how biological essentialism contributes to the general construction of sexuality knowledge by way of topic organisation. We then discuss the prominence of biological discourse in explanations of sexual distress and its dissemination into biomedical discourses around distress alleviation. Drawing on our analysis, we argue that the dominance of biological essentialism in the
The construction of sexuality knowledge precludes alternative discourses around cultural and sexual diversities, and justifies existing power structures.

7. Biological Essentialism in Chapter Organisation

We argue that the organisation of chapters implies a particular hierarchy of importance so that topics presented earlier on can be understood as foundational to the overall construct of sexuality. Furthermore, we contend that topics presented early on might be understood as important, and possibly even necessary, for one’s comprehension of topics presented in the latter portions of a textbook. In most of the examined textbooks such priority was conferred to biology. At least one chapter on human anatomy and physiology was included in all of the textbooks and it was consistently positioned as one of the first chapters. In addition to sexual anatomy, several textbooks had entire chapters on hormones (Textbooks C, F, and I) and genetics and/or evolution (Textbooks A and I). In contrast, topics around multiplicity and diversity of sexuality were either embedded within more broadly labelled topics or were presented as a distinct topic in the latter portions of the textbooks. For example, none of the textbooks had a separate chapter on sexuality and culture. Instead, culture was predominantly included in the introductory chapter with a hodgepodge of ‘diversity’ sub-topics such as ethics, spirituality, research, and education (e.g., Textbooks B, C, F, and K). Similarly, media, which is seen as a major contributor to the construction of sexuality, tended to be presented as a minor sub-topic or positioned under differently named topic such as sex for sale (Textbooks B, E, I, and J). Topics dealing with a diverse continuum of sexual expression such as sexual variations and behaviours were relegated to the latter parts of the texts, invariably following chapters on anatomy, hormones, and genetics.

The unified emphasis on biology as both preceding other topics and as underlying a cluster of chapter titles (re)produces the idea that genetics, anatomy, hormones, and instincts do not interact with, but rather define sexual expressions, orientations, and practices. The combination of biological essentialism with the prevailing assumption that knowledge, in general, is essential, universal, and neutral makes alternative organisations of sexuality topics neither possible nor necessary.

8. Biological Essentialism in Causal Explanations of Sexual Distress

Nine of the twelve textbooks had a separate chapter on sexual distress, providing indication of the importance of the topic of sexual distress today. In contrast, only two textbooks contained ‘sexual health’ as a part of a chapter title. One of these distinct chapters was, however, in the form of an epilogue. We want to note that although the textbooks most often used the terms dysfunction and disorder, we use the term distress throughout this paper. We feel that the term distress better acknowledges the variety of subjective experiences whereas
dysfunction and disorder are terms that others may label onto one’s experiences. We do use the term dysfunction or disorder in instances where we want to highlight the problematic use of this terminology in the textbooks. Finally, we purposefully did not replace the term dysfunction or disorder with the term distress when we felt that the word distress would also imply external imposition of distress even if the person did not experience distress.

All chapters contained information on the causes or origins of sexual distress. This information was either presented within sections on specific disorders or in separate chapter portions dedicated to origins of distress. We focus on the sections that specifically dealt with the causes of sexual distress.

First, the organisation of sections was driven by biological essentialism. All textbooks, with the exception of Textbooks F and J, covered physiological or medical causes before describing psychological and other causes. Similarly to the overall organisation of chapters, we argue that this systematic tendency of giving precedence to biological explanations of origins of distress produces the notion that biological causes are central and ubiquitous. Other causes, such as psychological and relational ones, are presented as being contingent on organic factors or being secondary, i.e., less central, to explanations of what determines sexual distress.

Second, causes were typically conceptualised as residing within the individual. Most chapters included distinct sections on physiological or psychological origins of sexual distress. In comparison, fewer chapters went beyond the individual and included sections on interpersonal causes, such as problems in one’s relationship. Even fewer chapters acknowledged cultural or social context, such as gender inequality, as discrete causes of sexual distress. Paradoxically, the emphasis on individual factors failed to incorporate subjective perceptions of experiencing and interpreting distress. As Textbook I stated, ‘at what point these concerns rise to the level of ‘disorders’ is a subjective question, and largely an irrelevant one.’

It is, then, the discourse of biology that takes precedence over subjective, psychological, relational, or socio-cultural discourses in the construction of knowledge regarding sexual distress. As a consequence, causal explanations of distress are mainly presented as a biological phenomenon and hence positioned outside of the complexity of human interaction.

9. The Privileging of Biomedical Discourse in Distress Alleviation

All chapters on sexual distress contained sections on treatments and strategies for alleviating sexual difficulties. As was the case with chapter organisation and explanations of distress, biological essentialism dominated the descriptions of distress alleviation. We identified a number of places where biological essentialism dispersed into related discourses around alleviation of sexual distress: the discourse of hegemonic masculinity in many therapies and treatments covered in the textbooks, the embedding of power imbalances in the description of sensate focus exercises, and the incorporation of biological essentialism into biomedical
discourses. In this chapter, we focus specifically on the pervasion of biomedical discourse in the description of treatments of erectile disorder.

The role of pharmaceutical companies in the framing of specific sexual experiences as sexual dysfunctions or disorders and the associated propagation of biomedical treatments has been comprehensively documented and critiqued.\(^{22}\) This biomedical discourse appeared to be privileged in most of the textbooks’ sections on treatments for ‘erectile disorder’ or ‘erectile dysfunction.’ For example, Textbook I contained four treatment subsections regarding erectile dysfunction. The first sub-section was short and was titled ‘Simple measures may alleviate the problem.’\(^{23}\) However, the main emphasis was on the next two sub-sections titled: ‘Viagra and similar drugs have become the leading treatments’ and ‘Erectile dysfunction can be treated with devices and implants.’\(^{24}\) The last sub-section was labelled ‘Psychological treatments may be useful.’\(^{25}\) The middle two sub-sections were the longest. In addition, the last sub-section began by stating that ‘If a man’s erectile dysfunction does not respond to medical treatments, or if there are factors suggesting his problems result from psychological or relationship issues, he may be referred to a sex therapist.’\(^{26}\) In addition to the privileged emphasis extended to biomedical treatments, the wording of the four sub-sections in Textbook I also demonstrates the insidious incorporation of biological essentialism into the justification for biomedical treatments as the most appropriate ones. It is stated that drugs have become ‘leading’ and devices and implants ‘can’ treat erectile dysfunction, but psychological treatments only ‘may’ be useful. Textbook I was not exceptional in its approach to explaining treatments of erectile dysfunction. Across many textbooks, described treatments for erectile disorder were heavily saturated in the biomedical discourse with Viagra and other drug treatments being often presented as a leading option to overcoming erectile disorder. What is problematic to us is that this material is not presented in pharmaceutical pamphlets marketing a medical solution but in psychology textbooks framed as neutral and independent of corporate (i.e., pharmaceutical) agenda. Yet, it is precisely the pharmaceutical companies that benefit from essentialising sexual distress as biologically based and conceptualizing it as a disorder. As a consequence, biomedical treatments appear as logically connected to the physiological causes, and more specifically, to the physiology itself.\(^{27}\) So while we do not suggest that authors of the textbooks intentionally represent pharmaceutical interests per se, it became apparent to us that by privileging biomedical discourses around treatments of erectile dysfunction and connecting them to the inescapable notion of biological essentialism, human sexuality textbooks legitimise these discourses and hence justify the existing dominant power structures as prevailing and necessary. Other approaches that would reposition alleviation from the focus on the treatment of the body were notably absent in the majority of textbooks. One example of such approach is the New View framework, in which Kaschak and Tiefer argue that sexual difficulties should be categorised by social and cultural differences,
relationship issues, psychological and personal history, and last, medical and physical problems rather than primarily concentrating on sexual difficulties as situated physiologically and psychologically within the individual.²⁸

10. Disprivileged Frameworks of Understanding

In our analysis, we found that aside of biological essentialism well-developed alternative discourses were largely missing. As already noted, none of the textbooks had a separate chapter on sexuality and culture. With respect to the chapters on sexual distress, many texts did pay some attention to cultural influences but attention was primarily directed at Western societies. For instance, Textbooks B’s and K’s coverage of cultural causes of sexual distress was situated within Western cultures with sub-sections on growing up in sexually repressed families and performance anxiety that men may face given the dominance of hegemonic masculinity in Western society. We suggest that the prevalence of biological essentialism precludes the need to substantively incorporate Non-Western cultures’ conceptualisations as important aspects of sexuality. In other words, the privileging of biological essentialism together with systematic under-representation of cultural diversity cements the biological discourse as central and makes significant discussion of cultural diversity irrelevant.

We also found that alternative frameworks regarding the conceptualizations of sexual distress and critiques of existing therapy were largely overlooked in the chapters on sexual distress. Textbook C was the only textbook that contained a section on critiques of sex therapy. Five of the nine textbooks included alternative frameworks of sexual distress however these explanations were typically not given a substantial amount of space and tended to be placed at the end of the chapter or presented as a ‘special interest’ topic. The New View of Women’s Sexual Problems was the most frequently described non-medical conceptualisation of sexual distress.²⁹ Briefly, the New View questions the conceptualisation of women’s sexual distress as comparable to men’s, especially alongside the biological dimension. For example, it is argued that women’s economic, social, and political circumstances are, in general, substantially different from those of men. Women are often responsible for child- and elder-care and may not readily have the physical, mental, and emotional resources for their sexual lives.³⁰ While we agree that women’s experiences of distress have to be understood in their own right, we also suggest that the established understanding of men’s sexual difficulties is problematic as it often ignores non-biological factors. Given the systematic marginalisation of non-medical conceptualisations of distress in the textbooks we analysed, we argue that alternative frameworks and understandings of sexual distress such as the above mentioned New View approach need to be given comparable scope and degree of explanation to the current dominant conceptualisations.³¹
11. Conclusion
The aim of our research is to uncover the dominant as well as the relatively under-represented themes in North American human sexuality textbooks. So far, we found that the organisation of chapters and the content of chapters on sexual distress are largely driven by biological essentialism discourse. While additional and alternative discourses are not always ignored, they are often treated as less significant than biology or as being preceded by, and thus affected by, biological essentialism. With respect to sexual distress, this concentration on individual biology privileges and legitimises biomedical discourses as prominent options for treatment of sexual distress.

It is our sense that human sexuality textbooks do not sufficiently acknowledge the role of cultural, social, and political factors in the construction of sexuality knowledge. Rather, the textbooks perpetuate current deterministic constructions and thus reinforce existing hegemonic and biological discourses around sexuality knowledge. As such, students of human sexuality who learn from the textbooks that we examined might not be exposed to the multiplicities and complexities of sexualities. This can be especially problematic if students are led to believe that sexuality knowledge presented in human sexuality textbooks is objective rather than shaped by culture, power, and language. As a troubling consequence, students might incorporate the particular construction of sexuality knowledge into understanding and interpretation of their experiences, and even into something as central as their identities. Furthermore, if sexuality textbooks and those who learn from them fairly unquestioningly adopt and perpetuate a particular construction of sexuality knowledge, the existing power structures are, at least implicitly, authorised to dominate the construction of sexuality knowledge itself. Hence, we close this paper with a call for challenge of dominant discourses around sexuality knowledge as well as for expanded representations of human sexualities in current North American survey-level sexuality textbooks.

Notes


13 Elizabeth Peel, ‘Chipping Away at the Taken-for-Granted; Reflection in a Sexualities Course’, *Feminism & Psychology* 20 (2010): 225-231.


23 Levay and Baldwin, Human Sexuality, 526.
24 Ibid., 526-527.
25 Ibid., 528.
26 Ibid.
29 Kaschak and Tiefer, A New View; Tiefer, ‘New View’, 89-96.
31 Kaschak and Tiefer, A New View.

Bibliography


**Monika Stelzl** is an Associate Professor at the Department of Psychology at St. Thomas University, Fredericton, Canada. Her research interests include women’s
accounts of sexual pleasure, the construction of sexuality knowledge, and the dynamics of multiple identities.

**Brittany Stairs** completed her honours thesis on the topic of construction of sexuality knowledge in 2012. She graduated from St. Thomas University with honours in Psychology in the spring of 2013. Her interests include critical analysis in the areas of sexuality knowledge, as well as in the medicalisation of pregnancy and birth. In the future, she hopes to apply this approach to maternity and birth through the study and practice of midwifery.

**Acknowledgement**

This research has received financial support in the form of St. Thomas University General Research Grant and St. Thomas University Conference Travel Grant.

**Appendix A**

List of human sexuality textbooks included in the analysis:


G. Rathus, Spencer A., Jeffrey S. Nevid, Lois Fichner-Rathus, and Edward S. Harold. *Human Sexuality in a World of
Monika Stelzl and Brittany Stairs


