

# Power, Deviance, Stigma, and Control: A Sociological Reconceptualization of Sexuality within Social Work Services

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*Despite shared societal and historical origins, sociology and social work have had a contentious relationship, leading some to suggest the two disciplines are inherently incompatible. This article challenges that assertion by examining how sociological conceptions of deviance, power, stigma, and control can contribute to more just social work services, particularly in the contentious area of adolescent sexuality. As respected social agents, social workers can play a role in counteracting the forces that alienate outsiders. By understanding how sociological theories contribute to their ability to contest the social discourse regarding sexuality, social workers can challenge social norms and work with clients in a more socially just manner.*

*Key words: Social work theories, sociological theories, adolescent sexuality, alternative sexualities*

Despite shared societal and historical origins, sociology and social work have had a contentious relationship, as seen in the eventual division between the Chicago School of sociology and the social work pioneers of the settlement and charity houses of the late 19th century (Dominelli, 1997). While Deegan (1988) suggested that conflicts surrounding gender and race partially led to the division of these fields, others have stated that the social change-driven focus of social work practice became incompatible with the academic and scientific focus of sociology (Dominelli, 1997; Leonard, 1966). Several attempts have been made to merge aspects of sociology and social work (e.g.,  
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Dominelli, 1997; Heraud, 1970; Leonard, 1966), yet a significant divide still separates the two disciplines. In fact, Ahmed-Mohamed (2011) recently suggested that the two fields may be inherently incompatible due to their divergent foci.

In many ways, this contemporary debate mirrors that of the early 1970s and even the 1930s. In a seminal work that examined the apparent divide between sociology and social work, Leighninger, Leighninger, and Pankin (1974) revisited dialogue from the early to mid-1900s that posited that sociology is more a science and social work more an art form. In their view, while there was some merit to these distinctions in terms of methodology and historical underpinnings, shifts in disciplinary epistemologies (i.e., interpretative veins of sociology had begun to [re]question the discipline's essentialist ontology while social workers were beginning to recognize that their impetus to action was at least partially dependent upon larger scale social factors that require attention as well) had opened the possibility of a more cooperative interface between the two. Yet, in a seemingly prophetic observation, they noted that pressures toward disciplinary specialization might hamper further conciliation.

Nearly thirty years later, questions regarding the value of grand theories to social work practice were again brought to the fore, as the drive toward evidence-based social work practice led to a debate about the heart of social work itself. For some, social work is inherently practice-based and they believe social work students' educations should be focused on alleviating suffering through the application of research-validated best practices, forgoing the need for social workers to engage in theoretical inquiry (e.g., Thyer, 2001a, 2001b). On the other side are those who view theories as essential guiding tools without which social work would become not only mechanistic, but also lose its ability to understand clients' lives in a holistic manner (e.g., Gomory, 2001a, 2001b). Following the latter, this article seeks to further the dialogue about how sociology and social work can mutually enhance each other by examining how increased awareness of key sociological theories and concepts can improve social workers' understandings of contentious contemporary issues and how public opinion and social movements affect not only social work practice, but

the foundations upon which that work is built.

The first section of this article reviews contemporary understandings of how social problems are defined through an exploration of power, deviance, stigma, and control. A second section will utilize the covered concepts to guide an inquiry into contemporary discourse surrounding sexuality, while the third and final section will apply the material to a social work practice scenario. Ultimately, the article suggests that a sociologically-informed version of social work practice will benefit practitioners and service recipients alike.

### Defining Social "Problems"

According to the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (2008, p. 3), "Fundamental to social work is attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living." Yet, social work texts pay scant attention to how social problems are defined, leading to gaps in social workers' knowledge. To address this, a review of the history of contemporary sociological inquiry into social problem formation is necessary.

Building upon Durkheim's investigations into the development of unique moral codes within a society, Blumer (1971) detailed a manner through which social problems are "created" by codifying collective (majority) behavior. In explicating five stages through which problems come to be recognized and then addressed, he endeavored to demonstrate the weaknesses of objectivist attempts to study problems as if they existed independent of their historical and social circumstances. Building on Blumer's work, Cohen (1972) considered not only how problems are recognized, but how reactions to them are developed and sustained. In doing so, he furthered the sociological conception of a "moral panic," defining it as,

a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially-accredited experts announce their diagnoses and solutions; ways

of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to...  
(Cohen, 1972, p. 1)

Cohen (1972) declared that those who are the subjects of the moral panics become "folk devils" in the eyes of society, or deviant individuals in need of control. More recently, Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009) suggested that "panics" evolve from modern society's fearfulness and insecurity relating myriad arenas of concern about the actions of others; as individuals are confronted with social change that suggests that social problem definitions are not absolute but in continual flux, they feel their values are vulnerable and seek control over the dialogue. As this occurs, those in the majority define themselves against the "others," ostracizing the others while simultaneously normalizing their own behaviors (Cohen, 1972; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009).

To be successful, this process requires the exertion of significant social power. While philosophers have debated the nature of power since ancient times, post-structuralist conceptualizations of power by Foucault and Bourdieu are particularly instructive when considering social problem development. Foucault's (1980, 1983) conception of power emphasized that power only exists when the will(s) of a person or group is/are imposed on others, creating reactions and responses. He highlighted how this imposition is intricately intertwined with the production of knowledge, articulating that exertions of power "create" reality and allow for the development of types of knowledge, knowledge which then serves to engender common understandings of those realities.

Through a process of socialization and majority power imposition, this "knowledge" becomes solidified as social "norms." These norms then regulate the actions and thoughts of those subsisting under them, and through a panopticon of societal discipline, the actions of individuals become regulated both externally and internally (individual morality/self-discipline), a hierarchy of propriety is created, and those who transgress norms are punished (Foucault, 1995/1975). While there is an opportunity for the development of alternative interpretations of reality, Foucault suggested that the strength of the current social discourse is such that it limits investigations outside the bounds of current patterns of thought. In

other words, the majority creates norms and is able to govern the actions of others not only through direct control, but also through the management of knowledge of and inquiry into the phenomenon in question.

Bourdieu (1984, 1999) suggested that symbolic powers develop and impose a sense of natural order onto society, an order that seeks to dominate alternate forms of knowledge that would subvert its hegemonic place. Actions and beliefs are inherently based upon self-interest, and individuals seek to mediate social practices and norms to place themselves and those like them at the top of the hierarchy. While those at the lower end of the hierarchy could theoretically resist the majority position, a process of "misrecognition" occurs through which individuals become unaware of their subordination to the norms of others, thereby remaining unable to challenge their position or attempt to establish alternate conceptualizations of social phenomena.

This subrogation is further enhanced by the imposition of labels of deviance. In an analysis of the function of societal labeling, Derrida (2016/1967) suggested that normality can only be defined through the imposition of its opposite—deviance; in doing so, he asserted that deviance is more a relational definition than an essential feature of individuals or acts. Going further, he noted that the primary always has priority over the secondary; in this case, those who are "normal" take precedence over those who are "deviant." Sociologically, the result is that the label of deviant is generally reserved for those who lack social, political, and/or economic power. Understood in this way, deviance is the violation of majority societal rules by those who lacked the power necessary to have input in the establishment of those norms (Lofland, 1969).

While individual regulation of some desires is essential to a productive society (e.g., proscriptions against assault on self or property), deviance typing moves beyond what is essential for social cooperation by attempting to impose moralistic standards through the exertion of power. As a majority begins to view itself as having the authority to manage others, it imposes labels and enacts societal repercussions toward "outsiders" who do not adhere to socially prescribed norms (Becker, 1963). Certain acts and actors become problematized, and new classifications and labels are developed and disseminated. These

constructions eventually become commonplace, becoming so ingrained within the cultural fabric that some acts come to be seen as self-evidently "wrong" and some actors inherently "deviant." Once this occurs, changing societal definitions is difficult, as that requires a reanalysis of the bases of the original construction of the established "knowledge," a task sometimes not even recognized as possible.

In summary, this method of understanding social problems suggests three things. First, it wholly rejects the objectivist conception that social problems are self-evidently aberrant, instead emphasizing how power dynamics and control mechanisms create and maintain definitions of social problems. Second, it describes how social problem formation and subsequent labeling of individuals based on their relationship to these social problems exist in a self-perpetuating cycle, leading to a false impression that some occurrences are axiomatically problematic. Third, it connects the societal definition of social problems to the social and personal labeling of individuals, emphasizing that society determines which individuals and actions are deviant.

When considering individuals and their actions within this framework, one final question must be answered—how does the social environment influence individuals' beliefs about themselves and their actions? Presented with social norms, individuals can either adhere to them or contradict them in words or actions. Adherence to norms is enforced through the social process of stigmatization, in which individuals come to see themselves as socially devalued based upon their difference from the majority (Goffman, 1963). Literature on the effects of stigma on psychosocial and even biomedical functioning is prevalent, with the bulk of it indicating clear relationships between the reception of negative psychosocial messaging and difficulties in many aspects of functioning (Bos, Pryor, Reeder, & Stutterheim, 2013).

Building upon work on stigmatization, labeling theory suggests that individuals sometime begin to embody their labels, adopting an identity based on their socially prescribed typing (Link & Phelan, 2010). Thus, antisocial labeling has been linked to further antisocial behaviors among those branded as criminals or deviants (Restivo & Lanier, 2013).

Within modified labeling theory, an individual who is given a label as victim can experience internalized stigma based upon their previous understanding of people that have that label, becoming more disabled by the negative label than by their actual condition (Link & Phelan, 2010). These labels can also have negative effects on service provision, as professionals may develop negative beliefs about clients based upon their labels (Horsfall, Cleary, & Hunt, 2010; Jung, Jamieson, Buro, & DeCesare, 2012). Ultimately, the most important aspect of labeling theory for this discussion is that socially-designated labels can have concrete effects on the beliefs and actions of the labeled individuals, both positively and negatively.

At the same time, it must be recognized that individuals are not merely passive recipients of societal labeling. Symbolic interactionism focuses on the ways in which individuals make meaning of social occurrences. In a circuitous cycle, individuals act toward objects and others in ways that have meaning for them, meanings that are themselves derived from other social interactions and interpretations (Blumer, 1969). As individuals interact, their interpretations of events and the meanings attached to them are constantly reappraised through a process that incorporates both the individuals' beliefs and others' responses to their actions. Throughout the process, individuals have agency to determine which of the myriad possible interpretations are most salient to their experience. Society, in turn, reacts to the individuals' interpretations and actions, providing further messaging that can guide the individuals' future actions and meaning-making processes. Thus, in order to understand individuals' actions, their experiences of their actions, and the effects of those actions, it is essential to focus on the meanings that the individuals make throughout the situation, meanings that reflect the individuals' acceptance or rejection of social definitions.

Thus, a discursive circle has been completed. After an event occurs, the meaning of the event is construed by individuals in different ways. Some will inevitably perceive the event in a similar manner, leading to a slowly coalescing societal definition of that type of event. This definition will come to be viewed by many as self-evident and will affect later interpretations of similar occurrences and provide labels for those

involved. This is not universal, however, as some interpret the event differently. These individuals may attempt to reject majority interpretations, but social forces counteract these re-interpretations and may even repress new knowledge. These limitations and social definitions affect the "re-interpreters," as they must not only take into account their own meaning of the event, but also societal reactions to the event and their own "deviant" meaning-making. If the individuals revert to the accepted social definition, no external change occurs and the societal interpretation patterns remain stagnant.

If the individuals' challenge the social proscription, however, there can be an attempt to redefine or counter-define their selves and their experiences, each of which have implications for the future beliefs and actions of the individuals and others. If proclaimed publicly and in a way that garners positive attention, a movement to redefine the event may occur. At some point, this redefinition may become the "new" social norm, usurping the place of the previous discourse. Subsequent rejection or acceptance of this new discourse then proceeds in a similar pattern, as individuals come to define themselves with or against the new discourse, while that discourse simultaneously exerts power over the production of knowledge that opposes it, completing a cycle of social construction and reconstruction. If the new definition is rejected, however, the individuals seeking the redefinition may become ostracized by society, not only for their deviant beliefs, but also for their "misguided" efforts to enact social change.

### Connections to Social Work

While some social workers may find this theoretical inquiry interesting, many might question its relevance to social work practice. Answering this question requires an examination of the historical progression of social work. Social work pioneers working in settlement houses viewed their work as an integral part of achieving social change, yet over time a perception grew that social work had become entrenched in the modern bureaucratic system, forgoing its "radical roots" in search of a professional identity (Jones, 2014; Reisch & Andrews, 2002). There also arose questions about the personal impact of social work services, as social workers' "treatment" of individuals

who have transgressed against social norms forces label imposition, sets up power differentials, and reinforces socially-constructed norms (Grichting, 1983). In many cases, such as severe neglect or abuse, few would argue the State's responsibility to become involved and enforce (contemporary) socially agreed-upon standards, but in other cases, the line may not be as clear. In recognition of the complexity of many aspects of social work, Siporin (1985) stated that social workers need to recognize they are often placed into a position of mediating between the interests of individuals and the mores of society. Proclaiming that social work is inherently a moral effort, he recommended open discussion of the place of normative discourses and how these mores are foisted upon individuals during the provision of social work services.

These concerns have continued as advocates for "radical," "critical," or "deviant" forms of social work have lamented the perception that social workers have become agents of social control whose actions serve to maintain the status quo, imploring social workers to return to their roots as advocates for social change (Rogowski, 2008; Woodward, 2013). There also has been a renewed sentiment that social work practice must be recognized as a political endeavor, due to its position at the intersection between public and personal social systems; it serves to both control and empower individuals, groups, and institutions (Nissen, 2013). Following these impetuses, some social workers and other theorists have actively challenged societal attitudes toward poverty, the welfare state, oppression, social work marketization, and the "troubled child" industry (e.g., Ferguson & Woodward, 2009; Giroux, 2009; O'Connor, 2001). These actions have had many positive results, but the movements have largely avoided more controversial issues.

Sexuality is one area largely neglected within this more provocative form of social work. While it is necessary to recognize the rapid progression in support for individuals who identify as sexual and/or gender minorities and the decriminalization of consensual sexual acts between members of the same sex, little social work literature has focused on challenging the status quo regarding the criminalization of other sex acts and the unjust imposition of life-long sex offender labels. The next section will begin to remedy this omission by

exploring sociological understandings of sexuality and sexual expression and their effects on individuals' lives.

### Contemporary Inquiry into Sexuality

A contemporary re-evaluation of how individuals' sexual actions come to be perceived as problematic is imperative, as sexual identities and sexual acts have become one of the most contested areas of social discourse (Levine, 2003). Recently Weinberg and Williams (2015) stated that no society has been indifferent to the sexuality of its members, and sexuality has always been subject to attempts to control it. Tracing the sociology of sexuality back to the interwar period, they noted that early views of sexuality were functionalist and sought to label and control individuals and their sexual actions. While the Kinsey reports (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953) challenged conventional beliefs about "normal" individuals' sexual activities, the emergence of McCarthyism and the Lavender Scare in the mid-1950s led to investigations and prosecutions of individuals engaged in "subversive" and "perverse" sexual acts (D'Emilio, 1998; Johnson, 2009). Through this process, "proper" sexuality was publicly defined and sexual actions regulated to ensure adherence to proscribed social norms.

Built upon the same ideas expressed by Becker (1963) in his analysis of the medicalization of social problems, Foucault's (1990/1976) work is particularly instructive to theoretical inquiry in the process through which certain sexual acts and actors came to be seen as deviant. Foucault contradicted the traditional belief that Victorian sensibilities had limited sexual discourse, instead suggesting that Victorian times led to an explosion and dispersion of sexual discourse. At that time, medicalization movements were leading physicians to seek new areas of control and sexual acts became a prime target. By defining sexuality as problematic and labeling individuals according to their sexual perversities, doctors carved out a niche for themselves as providers of "treatment" for sexual "illnesses." Afterwards, a process of reification occurred and what was once a behavior came to define a type of person.

Once this social evolution began, classes of "deviant" individuals, such as those described by Krafft-Ebing (1999/1886),

were created, many of which remain in the current Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The rapid advances in medical sciences in the early to mid-1900s accelerated this process, as medical professionals became revered for their knowledge and their ability to cure individuals with sexual maladies (Brandt & Gardner, 2013). These "illness" labels could then be applied to people and used to justify their subrogation.

With the emergence of social constructionism in the 1960s, challenges to the medical model of sexual classification arose. In a pivotal work, Gagnon and Simon (2005/1973) suggested that sexual actions are simply the enactment of sexual scripts, or sets of possible actions inherited from society that provide individuals with a range of possible sexual actions, and therefore have no essential basis. Queer theorists such as Rich (1980) built on this work, emphasizing that sexual categorization is an exertion of majority power. Going further, Rubin (1984) suggested that Western societies developed a hierarchy of sex that differentiates between "good" sex, or that which is normal, natural, healthy, and holy, and "bad" sex, which is abnormal, unnatural, sick, and sinful, with those engaging in "bad" sex being demeaned and labeled. She further noted that society allows state regulation of sex and sexuality to a degree not permitted for any other topic, and that the penalties for violations are amongst some of the most punitive—a situation largely unchanged today (Valverde, 2014).

Later work by Sedgwick (1991) and Butler (1993) problematized sexual categorization further by proclaiming that sexual categories are indelibly tied to the historical and societal times in which they emerge. Based on their interpretations of history, they suggested that mainstream labeling of individuals based on sexual actions is a thinly veiled attempt to reassert hegemonic control over individuals to ensure that their actions match societal standards. More recently, Irvine (2006) noted that the dominant contemporary sexual discourse centers on emotional enhancement and narratives of depravity, shame, and disgust, all of which lead to a labeling of and distancing from others. Thus, society has returned to a state of moral panic regarding sexual expression and has once again enacted Humphreys' (1975) "breastplate of righteousness," through which those who can exercise social control utilize

defensive mechanisms to label others in response to their own feelings of guilt or shame regarding their sexuality.

Despite these academic critiques, public discussion around sexuality remains mostly essentialist, as individuals are castigated, prosecuted heavily, and sometimes labeled for the rest of their lives in a manner that suggests sexual variations continue to be interpreted as representative of intrinsic moral deficiencies and sexual deviants as unredeemable continuous threats (Selvog, 2001). As a case in point, despite studies that have demonstrated that the increased incarcerations and public shaming that have occurred as a result of toughening sex offense crimes and the creation of sex offender registries have had little to no positive impact on crime reductions and may lead to iatrogenic outcomes (Maguire & Singer, 2011), the public continues to clamor to "know" everything about these individuals. As a result, these individuals are branded publicly for the rest of their lives, often preventing them from reestablishing themselves as functional members of society.

The exertion of social power over sexuality is also manifested through attempts to limit the production and dissemination of knowledge. As detailed by Levine (2003), social movements inspired by the Religious Right have resulted in limitations to sexual health education content, restrictions in access to birth control, and increases in attempts to "protect" children from the "negative" influence of a liberalized sexual discourse. While advocates for abstinence-only sexual education or the exclusion of discussions of non-procreative forms of sexual expression suggest this helps youth develop a healthier understanding of sexuality, data demonstrate both are ineffective and often counterproductive (Fisher, 2009; Santelli et al., 2006). Sociologically speaking, an undercurrent of power is attempting to control sexual behaviors, as only one sexual script is acknowledged and alternate knowledge is suppressed, even as the results are antithetical.

At the same time, history offers numerous examples of changing societal opinions toward various sexual acts. Steeped in a religious moralistic tradition, masturbation, fellatio, and sodomy were considered to be mortal sins and to cause a number of physical and psychosocial difficulties (Ellis, 1942/1897-1928; Ølstein Endsjø, 2011). Such were the proscriptions against these forms of sexual expression that in some

places engaging in them was punishable by death. In contemporary times, however, masturbation is recognized as possibly beneficial to health and both fellatio and sodomy are acknowledged as relatively commonplace (Laqueur, 2003; Leichter, Chandra, Liddon, Fenton, & Aral, 2007), highlighting that advancement is possible.

These concurrent yet contradictory shifts in social understanding of sexuality demonstrate that sexual discourse is in a state of flux. Biology mandates certain actions for procreation, but does not limit manners of sexual expression. Rather, limits that impinge on people's rights and subjugate "deviants" are imposed through culturally- and historically-based social proscriptions. As respected social agents, social workers can play a role in counteracting forces that seek to stigmatize and label sexual "deviants." While it is prudent for professionals to intervene when individuals' rights are violated (e.g., sexual abuse) and assist individuals who seek to alleviate concerns about their sexual activities (or lack thereof), they should not automatically seek to "treat" "non-normative" manifestations of sexuality unless there is a clear, demonstrable harm. Instead they must examine the dynamics that create and sustain negative labeling and use their skills to enact positive change. To demonstrate the potential of such a shift, the following scenario has been constructed to illustrate how a liberalized, sociological conception of sexuality can enhance social work practice.

### A Social Work Practice Scenario

In writing this scenario, considerable thought was given to the creation of a situation that is both practical and controversial. Lest this discussion be seen as somehow encouraging unlawful activities, it must be stated that the author clearly recognizes that the scenario in question is unlawful under current law in the United States and that social workers confronted with this type of situation in practice would be legally bound to report it to the appropriate authorities. That being said, the intention here is to go beyond legalistic judgment and subject the scenario to a more in-depth sociological evaluation.

In this scenario, a social worker becomes aware of situation in which a post-pubescent 14-year-old has willingly engaged

in sexual activities with a 21-year-old. When discussing the relationship, the 14-year-old reports the two met at an event and the younger individual pursued a relationship with the older one. Despite the older individual's initial reservations due to the other's age, a relationship developed and they had been dating for ten months before becoming sexually active.

When crafting this scenario, the age of 14 was purposefully chosen due to being below the legal age of consent throughout the United States (Age of Consent by State, 2015), but the age at or before which 20% of teens become sexually active (Finer & Philbin, 2013). It is also an age at which many adults consider younger individuals to still be youth, and in need of "protection" from sexual dialogue (Levine, 2003). The age of 21 was chosen because it is above the legal age of majority in all states in the United States (National Conference of State Legislators, 2015), and is the age for legal consumption of alcohol in the United States (which some see as a final mark of achieving adulthood). Additionally, the 7-year age gap exceeds the legal standards that permit sexual activities by individuals above the age of consent with individuals below it, as long as both parties are within a defined "gap," most often 3 or 4 years (Olszewski, 2006).

While sexual activity between adults and pre-pubescent children is clearly regarded as a crime in modern society, the legal and moral line between post-pubescent adolescents and adults is less clear (Horvath & Giner-Sorolla, 2007; Rind, 2010; Yuill, 2010). Graupner and Bullough (2004) examined this in depth, suggesting that while these actions are criminal in contemporary society, this was not always true and may not relate directly to any negative effects, particularly if the criterion of judgment is harm to the adolescent. Further, Bullough (2004), Olszewski (2006), and James (2009) noted continual shifts in the ages at which an individual is legally allowed to consent to sex in the United States and abroad, with legal ages of consent ranging from 14 to 21 in Europe. While one might expect ages of consent to be continuously rising, there have been some recent movements to reduce the age of consent (BBC News, 2013).

For this situation, context is especially important, as legal practices are culturally-based. Within the United States, respondents to a survey of legislators suggested five general

reasons for statutory rape laws, all of which had clear judgmental, moralistic, classist, and heterosexist undercurrents that sought out maximum control of others. The reasons given indicated that teens need to be protected from sex (not just with older individuals), that they cannot be trusted to make their own sexual choices, and that the primary outcome of their sexual expression is not only pregnancy, but pregnancy resulting in mothers receiving social welfare benefits (Davis & Twombly, 2000). The underlying implication is that only irresponsible adolescents from lower socio-economic classes engage in sexual activities with older individuals, that these sexual activities are inherently heterosexual in nature, and that legal proscriptions against them will moderate individuals' behaviors. They also belie a double standard, as pregnancy can just as easily result from intercourse between adolescents, which is a legal activity.

Another consideration is the current discourse surrounding childhood sexuality. Within contemporary sexual discourse, individuals are generally divided into categories of child versus adult (Graupner & Bullough, 2004), and many adults resist suggestions that humans are sexual from birth and youthful sexual exploration and experimentation is normal (Thigpen, 2009). Further, the contemporary extension of childhood through adolescence and into emerging adulthood has lengthened the time between sexual development and lifestyle changes such as marriage, leading to an expanded gap between biological impetuses toward sexual expression (which initiate around ages 11-12 [Fortenberry, 2013]) and when socially-sanctioned sexual activities within a marital relationship can occur. Thus, despite some acceptance that adolescents are sexual beings, there are continuing efforts to push "burgeoning" sexuality until later ages and to support this movement through a veil of morality (Levine, 2003; Steutel, 2009; Waites, 2005).

It is also worth noting that in the initial description of the scenario, the individuals' genders were purposely not included—a decision directly related to how adolescent sexuality is framed in contemporary society. For instance, one study found that participants believed sexual activities between a younger female and an older male were more damaging emotionally and to the younger individual's reputation than when

the genders were reversed, and should therefore be punished more severely (Sahl & Keene, 2010). Further, Dollar, Perry, Fromuth, and Holt (2004) examined a hypothetical sexual relationship between a teacher and student and found similar results, including a view among male respondents that the younger male, older female scenario might be beneficial to the youth. These differences also operate within the legal system, as research has shown that cases involving the sexual abuse of males are prosecuted less than those involving females, especially when the offenses against the males are made by a female (Edelson, 2013; Smith, 2012). Taken together, this research demonstrates the power of gendered social constructions of sexuality and their impact on perceptions of sexual relationships.

In situations such as these, it is also essential to recognize the strength of deviance typing and labeling. During discussions for the latest revision of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders there was a significant push for a new diagnostic category of hebephilia (sexual attraction to youth beyond puberty but not yet adults). Proponents framed their arguments in terms of victimology and the need to diagnosis dangerous "individuals" (note: individuals, not actions, a reification of "sex offenders"), while opponents argued the normality and commonality of this sexual attraction (note the expansive pornographic industry focus on individuals who are "barely legal"), not to mention the inherent quandary of determining who is an "adult" other than through arbitrary legalistic definitions that are in constant flux. Ultimately, the new diagnosis was not adopted, but the debate demonstrated the mutability in social questions about the propriety of sexual activities and how some seek to control others through imposition of social authorities.

In terms of knowledge suppression, one need not look beyond the controversy that erupted around Rind, Tromovitch, and Bauserman's (1998) article that suggested that not all forms of child "sexual abuse" are harmful in the long-term and that a differentiation is needed between adolescent sexual abuse, which causes harm, and adult-adolescent sex, which may be a non-harmful variant of sexual activity. While the aftermath of this publication has been documented elsewhere (e.g.,

Lilienfeld, 2002; Mirkin, 2000), the general message was clear—the public was not ready to reevaluate common perceptions about sexual activity between adolescents and adults such that the topic was considered too taboo to even research; in other words, we already "know" sexual activity between an adult and an adolescent is harmful, so attempts to challenge this assertion with new knowledge are inherently misguided and should be punished, even if based upon empirical evidence.

Finally, there arise perhaps the most significant questions, those related to harm to the individuals involved. While some have suggested that any sexual interactions between youth and adults are inherently exploitive, abusive, or immoral regardless of the age of the youth (e.g., Grover, 2007; Ondersma, Chaffin, Berliner, Cordon, & Goodman, 2001; Steutel, 2009), others have stated it is not the age of the youth that is most significant, but the individuals' perceptions of the experience or the dynamics of the interaction that are important (Arreola, Neilands, Pollack, Paul, & Catania, 2008; Rind, 2004; Stanley, Bartholomew, & Oram, 2004). Within this line of thought, attention should be paid to coercion, power differentials, and the developmental maturity of the individuals involved. Pressing further, and perhaps more controversially, some research has even suggested that sexual interactions between consenting adolescents and adults may be beneficial to adolescent sexual development and may predict lower levels of future sex-risk behavior (Bruce, Harper, Fernandez, Jamil, & Adolescent Medicine Trials Network for HIV/AIDS Interventions, 2012; Rind, 2004; Rind & Welter, 2014, 2016; Yuill & Durber, 2008). It should be noted that much of this research has been done with males who identify as gay or bisexual, itself an artifact of cultural stereotypes of male homosexuals being predisposed to attraction to young boys.

This situation also invokes questions relating to stigma, labeling, and possible iatrogenic effects. Negative societal beliefs about individuals labeled as sex offenders have been well documented, especially when youth are involved and a label of "pedophile" is assigned to an individual. Research by Imhoff (2015) found social desirability effects on punitive attitudes toward pedophiles, indicating that participants felt it socially desirable to express more punitive attitudes toward those

individuals. Negative professional attitudes toward sex offenders have also been documented, which can limit appropriate service provision (Jung et al., 2012). While some may feel the older individual deserves a label of assailant, sex offender, or pedophile, it must be recognized that labels have intense connotations that may counteract the purported legal principle of rehabilitation.

Additionally, there are also implications of the labeling process for the younger individual, as that person becomes a victim in the eyes of many. There is scant literature on the effects of being labeled as a victim of sexual abuse, but a study by Holguin (2003) found that being noted as a victim of childhood sexual abuse negatively impacted professionals' beliefs about the youth's later social and emotional functioning. Other research found a sizable portion of youth legally categorized as victims of statutory violations viewed the relationships as reciprocal, felt professional intervention was intrusive and demeaning, felt the victimization narrative was more problematic than the relationship, and expressed confusion about being labeled as victims of voluntary actions (Tener, Walsh, Jones, & Kinnish, 2014). While some in the study also felt the experience was exploitive and experienced significant emotional trauma (and their experiences certainly should not be disregarded), what is important is the recognition that the younger individual can and will make their own meaning of the situation. This needs to be explored, as the impositions of others' interpretations and labels can be counterproductive.

How then would social workers attuned to sociological constructs discussed above respond to the above situation? First, it must be reiterated that it would be incumbent upon the social worker to fulfill legal and professional obligations to report the situation to the appropriate authorities. Yet, social workers also have an obligation to work with the younger individual to examine how the individual has interpreted the situation. Did the individual view the situation as abusive, coercive, or traumatic, or is the individual indifferent to the event or perhaps does the individual view it positively? If the former, there are well established therapeutic protocols that can and should be utilized in treatment. If it is the latter, the social workers should be willing to explore this with the

individual to understand these feelings. This should not be done in a way that re-enforces a traumatological discourse, rooting around in the individual's psyche for maladjustments or previous trauma that has "led" the individual to accept this type of "trauma," but rather to help the individual explore the situation for what it was and to understand the bases of the societal reaction, just as social workers are trained to do with other life occurrences. Doing so reduces the possibility of iatrogenic effects and ensures the younger individual's voice is heard and view respected. This is, after all, the heart of social work's core tenet of client self-determination.

Returning to the roots of social work practice, the social workers should further consider their responsibility toward advocacy and social change. In contemporary times, the 21-year-old will be subject to intense legal scrutiny, prosecution, and possibly life-long sanctions. In the case of a non-coercive, willing, and non-traumatic sexual interaction, social workers focused on social justice and client self-determination would have a responsibility to ensure the voice of the younger individual is recognized, advocate for a more just judgment of the older individuals, and refute the predatory narrative that is all but certain to develop. Further, they would seek to engage the local and greater society in discussion about the ways in which the actions were portrayed versus how they were perceived by the individuals involved. Doing so would fulfill social work's proclamation of being attuned to social justice and the rights of all by helping the older individual, as well as providing a sense of assurance and justice to the younger, who might otherwise have a neutral or positive experience turned into a negative one based solely on others' social judgements. It would also help society move toward Weeks' (1997) nearly twenty-year old call for a professional ethics of relationships, not a morality of sexual acts.

## Conclusion

Returning to a more general examination of the current discourse surrounding sexuality, it is clear that society remains in a state of moral panic around sexuality, especially when youth are involved. Not only are there heightened levels of

claims-making that rely on questionable data, but there are explicit attempts to limit the production of knowledge related to sexuality and to silence certain discussions. Whether fortunately or unfortunately, social work practitioners are often thrust into the role of moderating these conflicts as publicly recognized experts and treatment providers, and therefore they need to be aware of the consequences of their actions.

To be more effective and client-driven, social workers must be open to considering the meaning of a sexual (or, really, any) situation/experience as construed by the individuals, even if reevaluating our current "knowledge" is required. Attention still must be directed toward the harmful effects of interpersonal exertions of power and control, but there also needs to be a focus on how societally-constructed perceptions of propriety can similarly harm individuals. In this way, social workers can understand which aspects of sexuality are more objectively harmful (i.e., sexual coercion, sexual assault and rape, to name a few) and those that are merely non-normative. Further, by exploring sociological considerations such as the social status assigned to certain "categories" of people, power dynamics between groups, degrees of authority provided to individuals and groups, roles assigned to individuals and groups, and the legitimacy or illegitimacy of certain ways of thinking, social workers can move closer to being able to help the most oppressed.

Doing so will involve introspection and self-examination, as social workers have been acculturated in a society dominated by normative views of sexuality. Making change will involve reconsidering sexual values and recognizing their situatedness within a culture. Certain norms and values, like the protection of children and the rightful prosecution of those who do harm to others, must be upheld, but this may not extend to all actions viewed currently as problematic. Ultimately, in an often-oppressive society subject to a cultural hegemony that seeks to define normative actions and sanction transgressors, social workers need to become further attuned to the ways in which social discourse affects their work. Wading into contentious discussion around difficult topics, questioning seemingly "settled" social problem definitions such as sexual offenses, advocating for reductions in power differentials between those

who are "normal" and those who are "deviant," and advocating for systematic change to assist "deviants" will not be easy, but it will benefit social workers, their clients, and the social work profession as a whole.

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