

July 2024
AIDS Clinical Conference :
Sexual Wellbeing-
From Theory to Public Health and Clinical Practice

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Sexual wellbeing: from theory to public health and clinical practice

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Disclosures

> I have no conflicts of interest to declare



Objectives

- > Review the WHO definition of sexual health
- > Discuss what sexual health means in practice
- > Examine why and how sexual health may fall short of our patients needs
- > Consider a framework that includes sexual wellbeing, justice and pleasure as distinct from, but related to, sexual health



Sexual health: a starting point

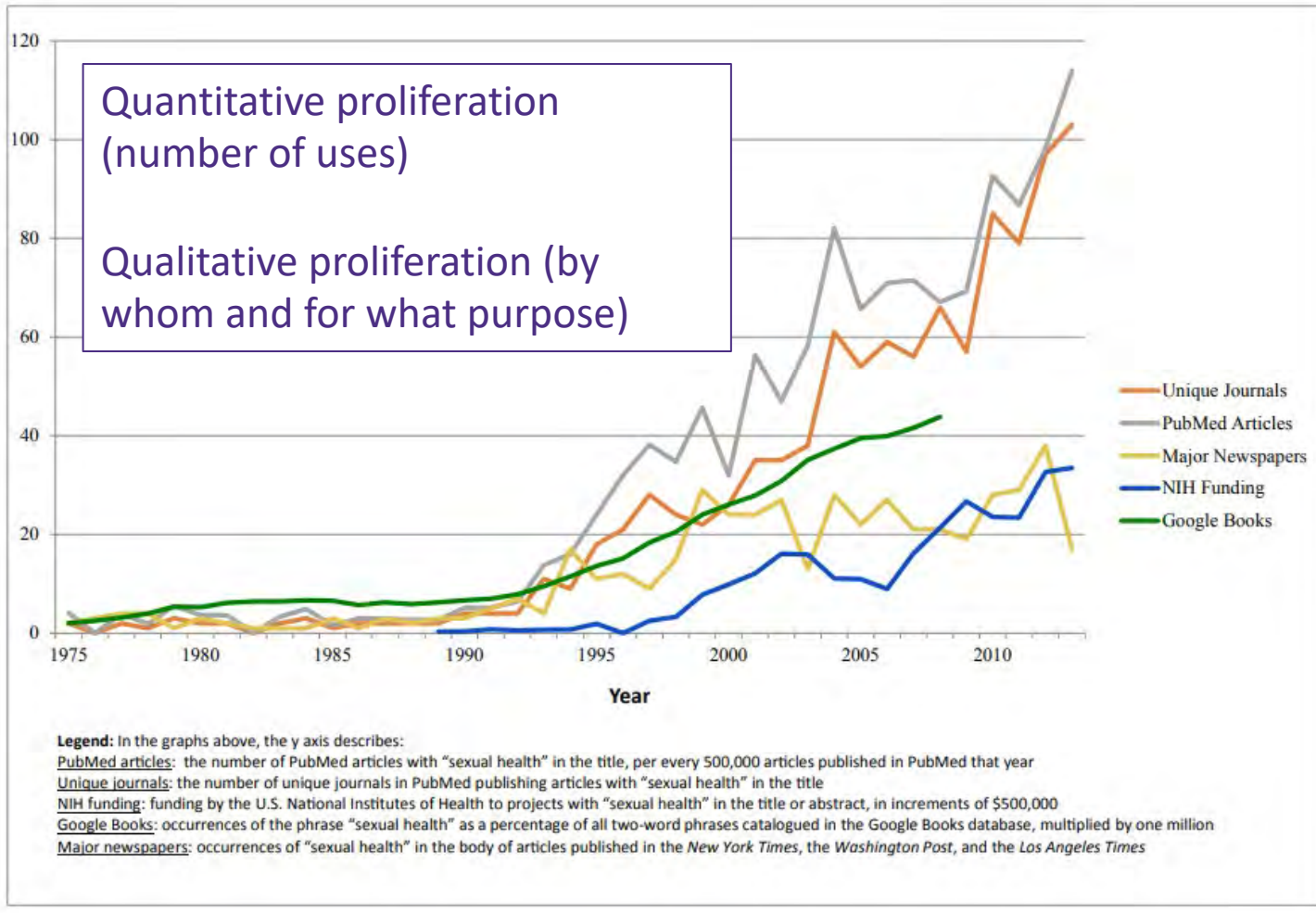
WHO, 2006a

- > Sexual health is a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity.
- > Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences free of coercion, discrimination, and violence.
- > For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected, and fulfilled.



The proliferation of “sexual health”

Epstein & Mamo, SSM, 2017.



What is actually meant by “sexual health”?

Epstein & Mamo, SSM, 2017.

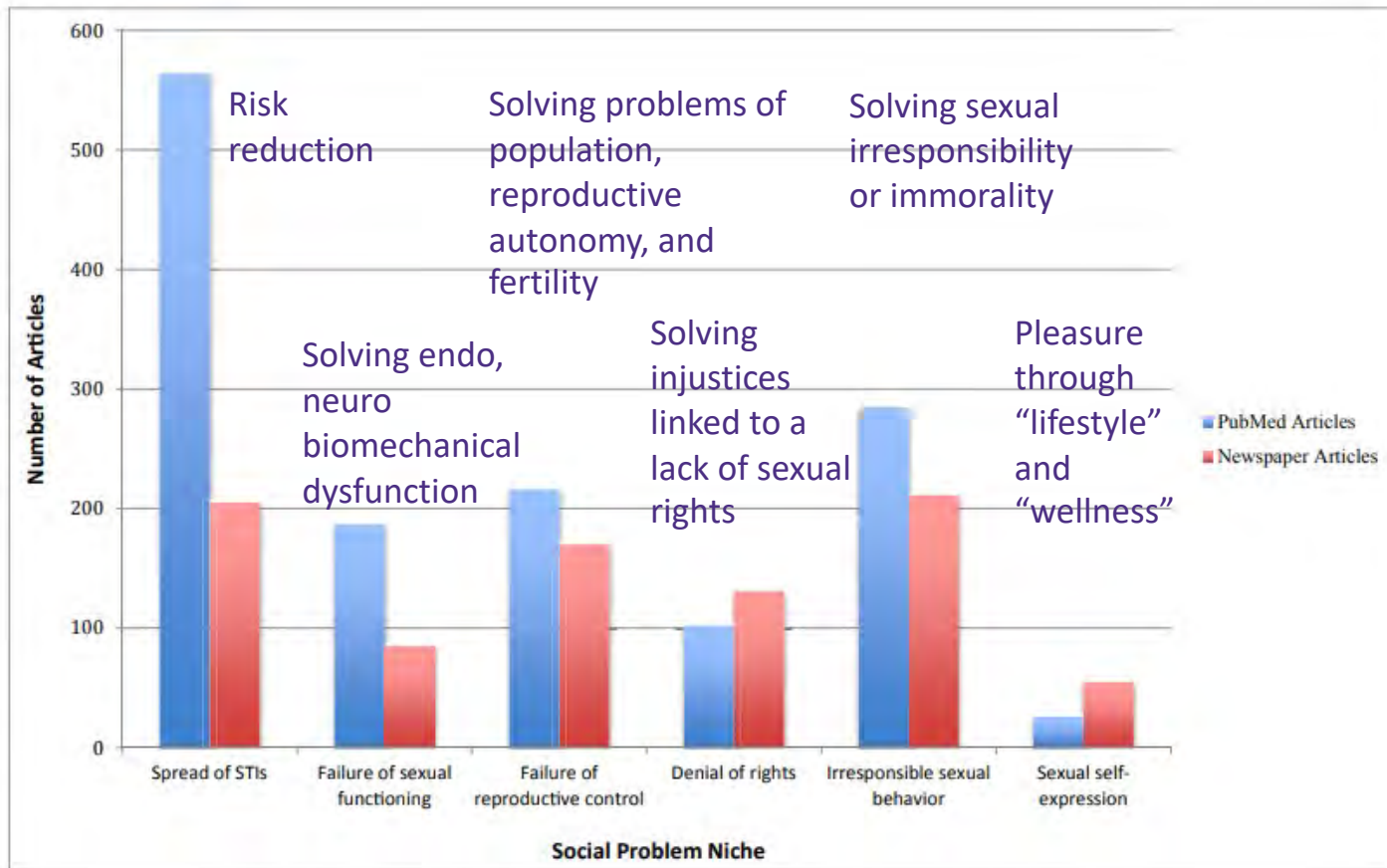


Fig. 4. Numbers of Articles by Social Problem Niche: PubMed vs. 3 Major Newspapers.



Is that really all that sexual health is?

Carter et al. Sex Roles, 2017; Epstein & Mamo, SSM, 2017.

- > Despite WHO's efforts to create a definition of sexual health that reduces stigma by focusing on pleasure, freedom and sexual rights, what "sexual health" means as it is refracted through the lens of public health and medicine is much narrower
- > Themes of surveillance, risk, control, correction, pathology, and morality/responsibility that are not relevant or even desired by people when they think of [sexual] health

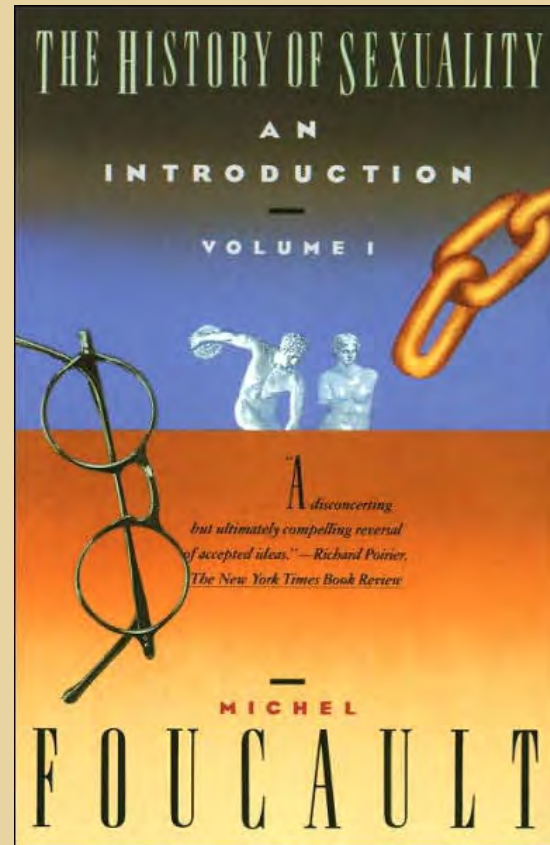
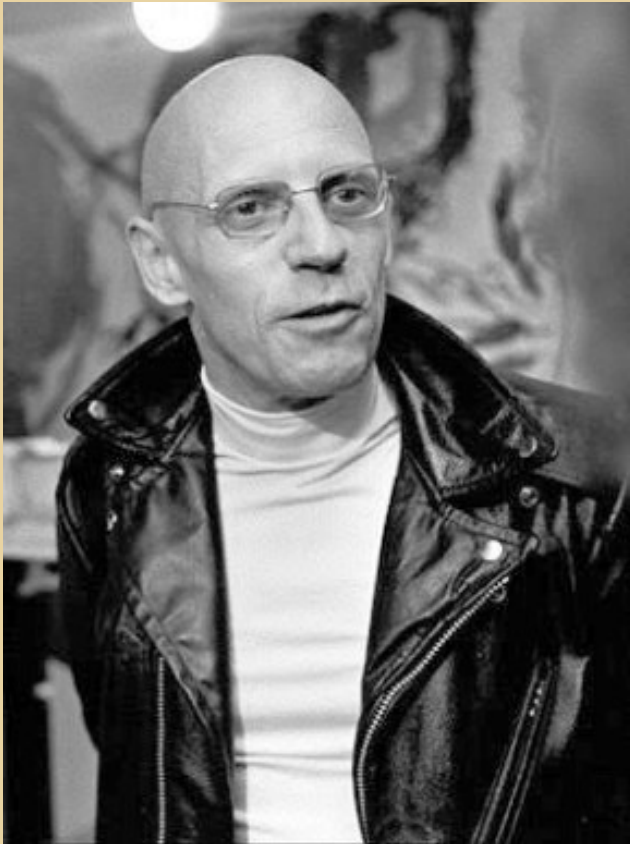


These narrow definitions

- > Reinforce stigma
- > Obfuscate sociocultural conditions that intersect with the enactment of one's sexuality
- > Obscure the diversity of sexual experiences
- > Stand in the way of [sexual] health equity
- > Hinder scientific advancement with a lack of common definition



Biopower: the definitions of sexual health are not limited by accident



Biopower: what is it?

- > “[A] power that exerts a positive (read: productive/generative) influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations.”
- > “art of governing life”
- > “...a power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death”



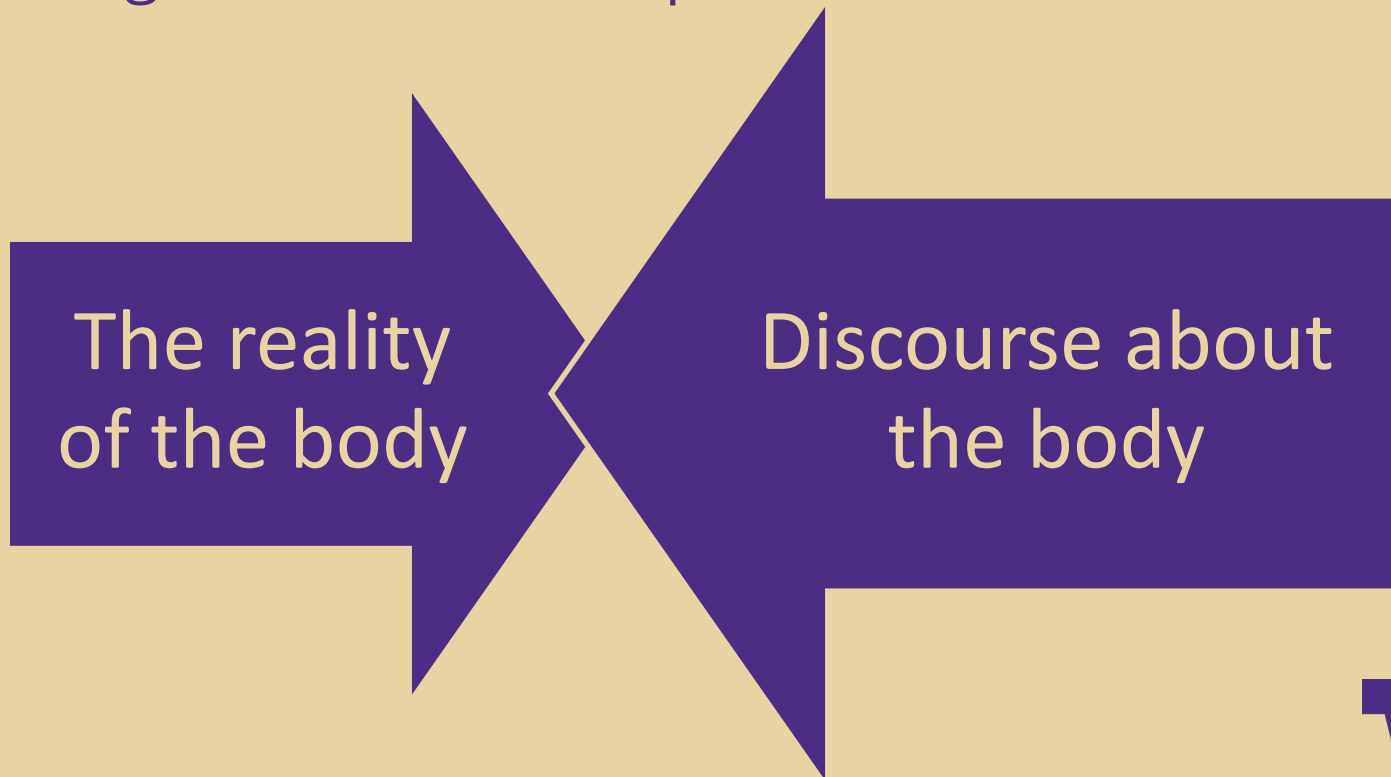
Biopower: how does it work?

- > The subject of biopower is “the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biologic processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy, and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary”
- > The supervision of these processes is “effected through an entire series of interventions and *regulatory controls: a biopolitics of the population.*”



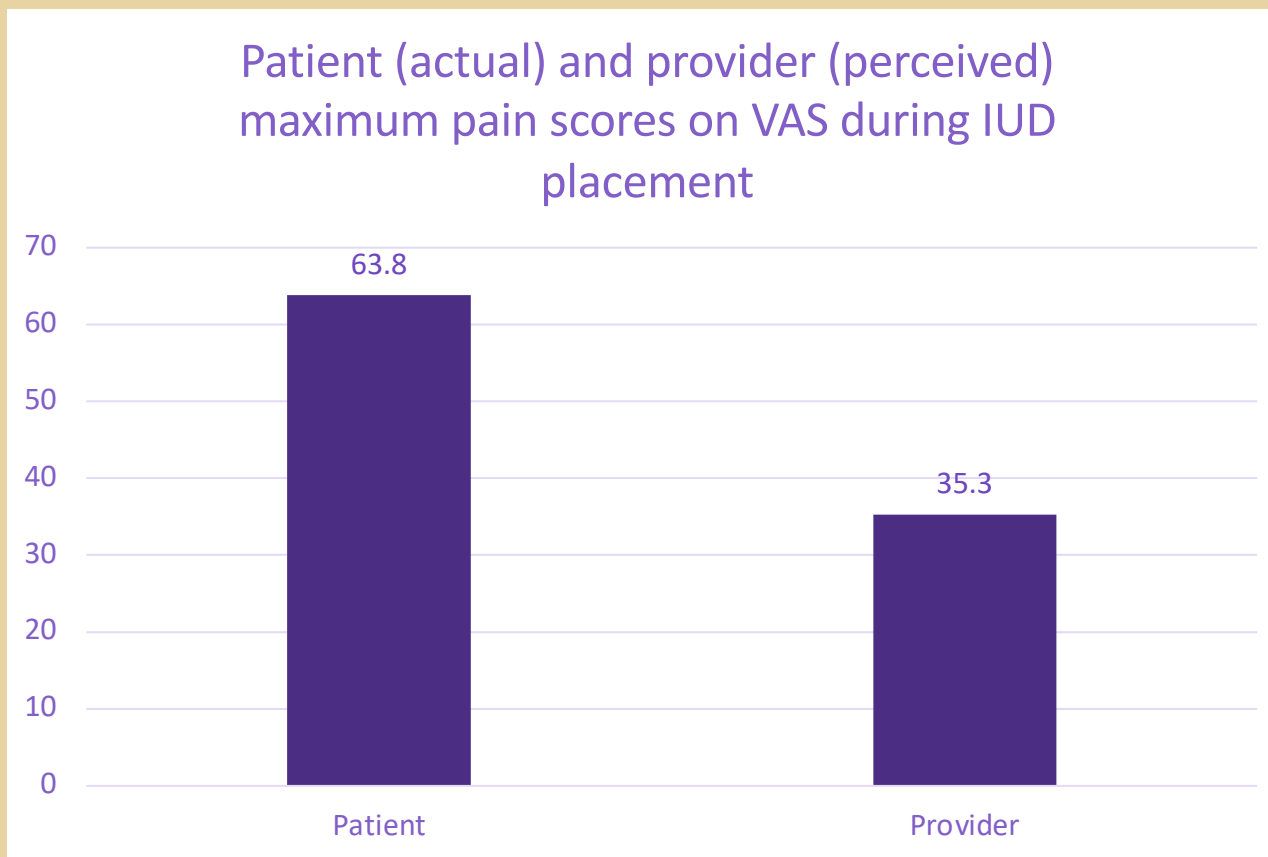
The construction of sex, gender, race and sexuality is central to biopower

- > Sex, gender, race, and sexuality are ***constructed*** through the exercise of power relations



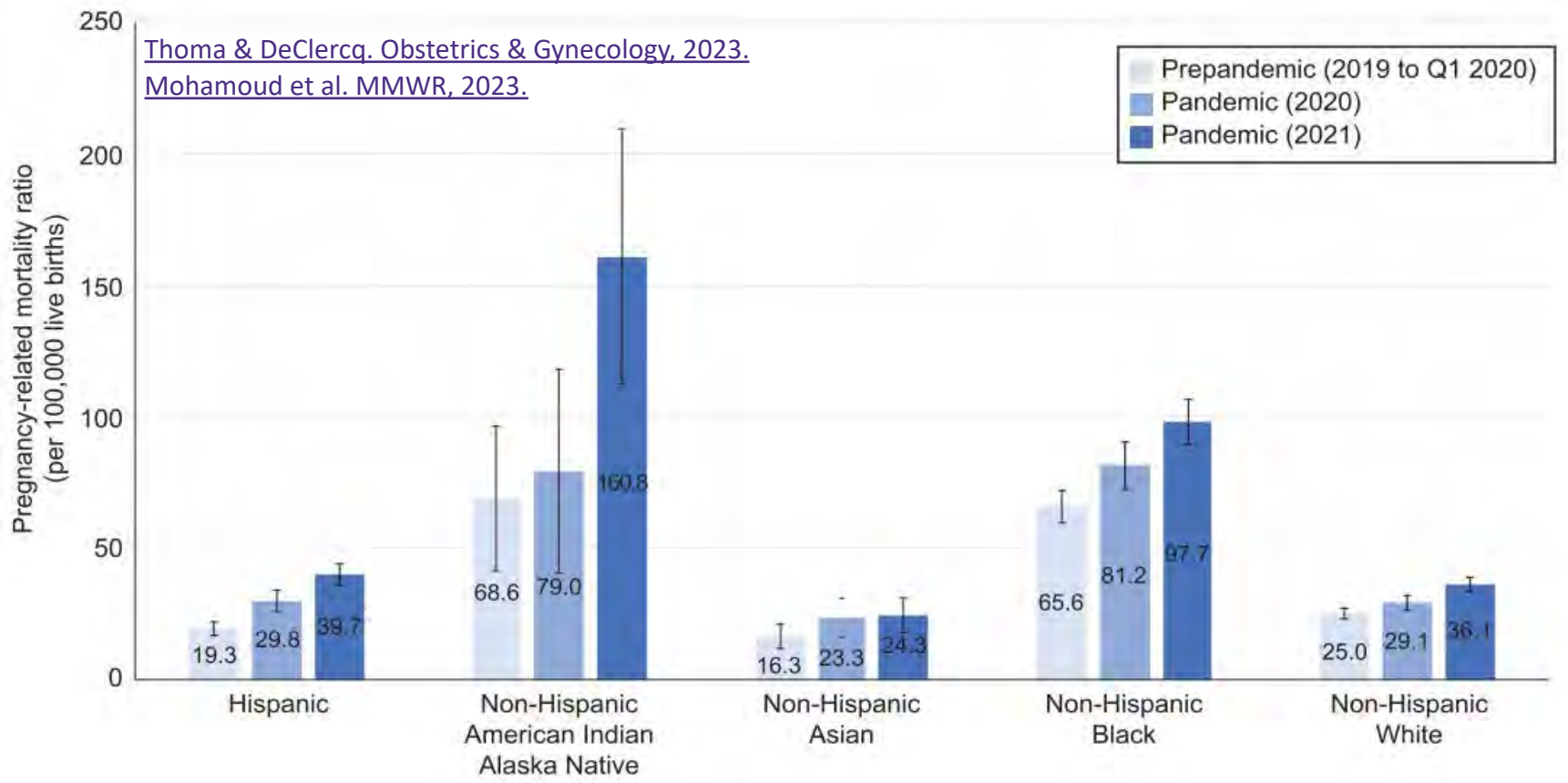
Biopower has real consequences for sexual health: provider and patient pain perception during IUD insertion

Maguire et al. Contraception, 2014



The Retrievals





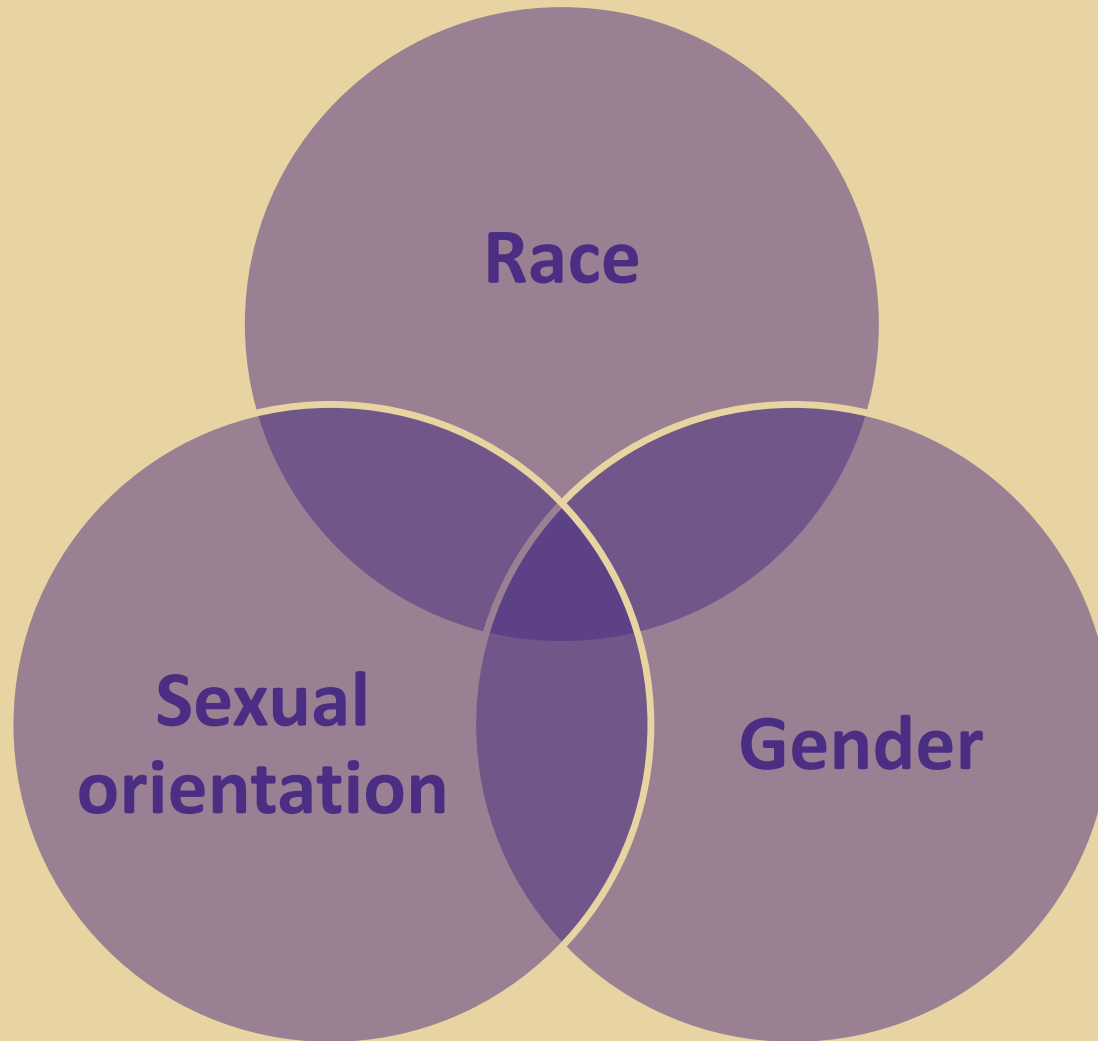
	Hispanic	AI/AN + NH/PI	Asian	Black	White
Mistreatment	29.3%	20.0%	14.8%	30.0%	17.8%
Shouted at/ scolded	7.7%	8.6%	5.2%	9.0%	6.2%
Ignored	13.0%	5.7%	4.4%	11.7%	9.0%
Physical abuse	7.0%	2.9%	3.5%	6.5%	2.8%
Discrimination	36.6%	31.4%	22.6%	40.1%	26.0%

Can you think of examples of biopower related to HIV, both productive and counterproductive?

- > Public health surveillance
- > HIV criminalization laws
- > Forced sterilization of people living with HIV
- > Immigration laws related to HIV status
- > Exclusion/inclusion criteria for studies
- > Gender v sexual practice-specific FDA approvals for F/TAF
- > Sero-sorting, sero-positioning
- > Recommendations around breast/chestfeeding
- > Pre- and post-exposure prophylaxis
- > Treatment as prevention and U = U



Biopower has led to and sustains discrimination and violence based on



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Biopower, bodily autonomy, and pleasure

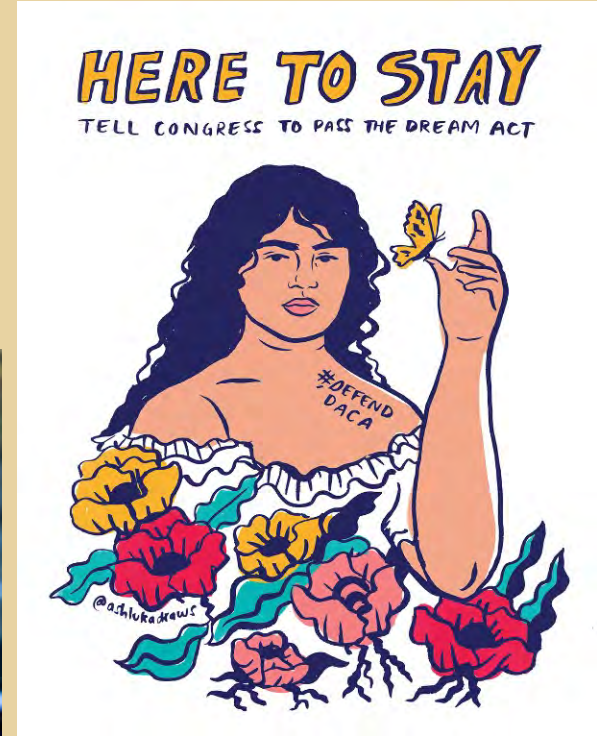
Isabel Wilkerson. Caste: The Origin of Our Discontents (2020).

- > Does anyone have full, unfettered access to and control over their own bodies? If so, who?
- > Biopower ultimately allows people from the dominant caste fuller and freer access to their bodies and sexual pleasure while restricting that bodily autonomy and access to pleasure for those in the lower castes (defined by race, ethnicity, gender, disability, sexuality, HIV status)



Pleasure is political

Bianca Laureano (ed). The People's Book of Human Sexuality (2023).



Sexual pleasure, justice, and wellbeing enter the chat

Mitchell et al. Lancet Public Health, 2021.

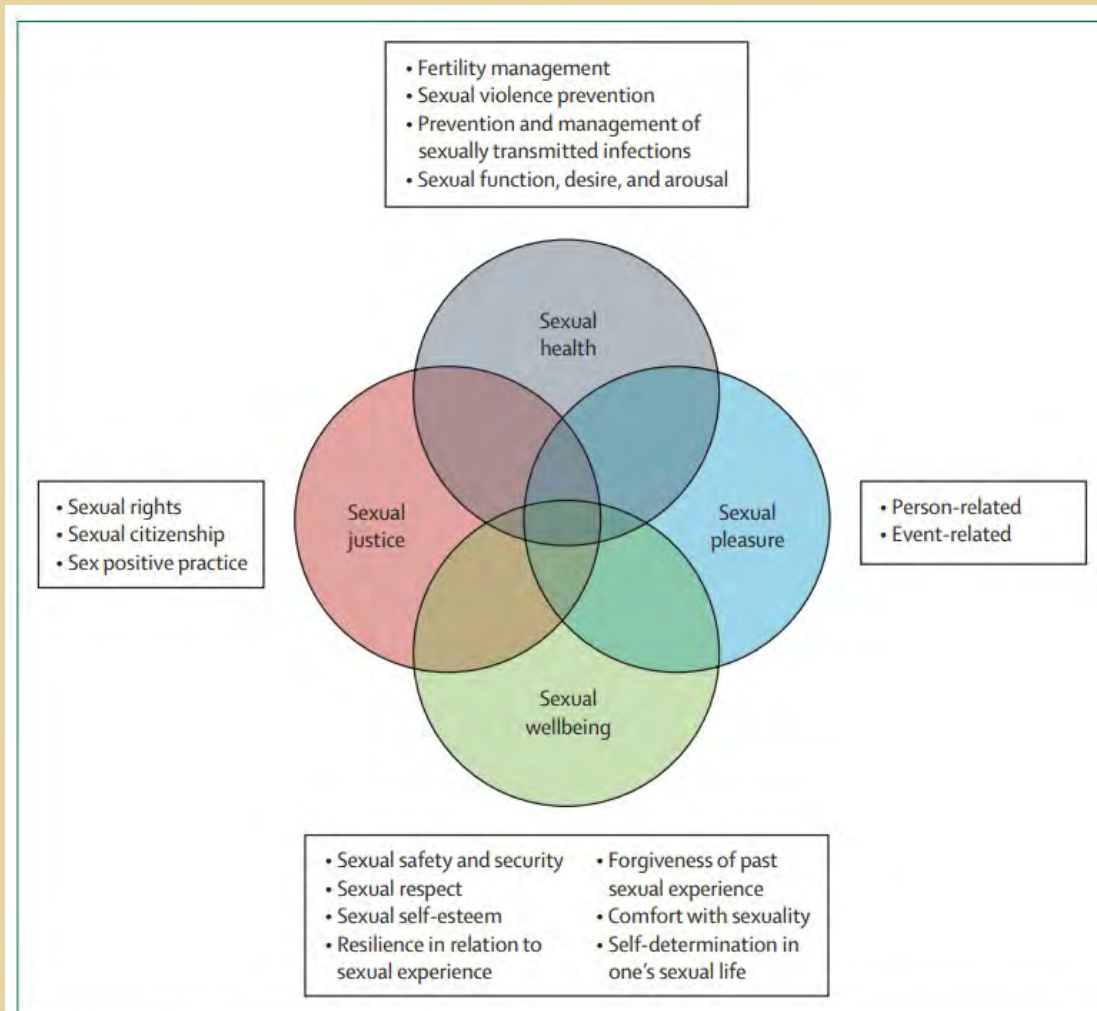


Figure: Four pillars of comprehensive public health focused inquiry and intervention in relation to sexuality



Sexual pleasure: definition and enabling factors

World Association for Sexual Health, 2019.

- > "...the physical and/or psychological satisfaction and enjoyment derived from shared or solitary erotic experiences, including thoughts, fantasies, dreams, emotions, and feelings."
- > Enabling factors include:



Sexual pleasure: core concepts

World Association for Sexual Health, 2019.

- > Pleasurable and safe sexual experiences free of discrimination, coercion, and violence are a fundamental part of sexual health and wellbeing for all
- > Access to sources of sexual pleasure is part of the human experience and subjective wellbeing



Sexual pleasure: core concepts

World Association for Sexual Health, 2019.

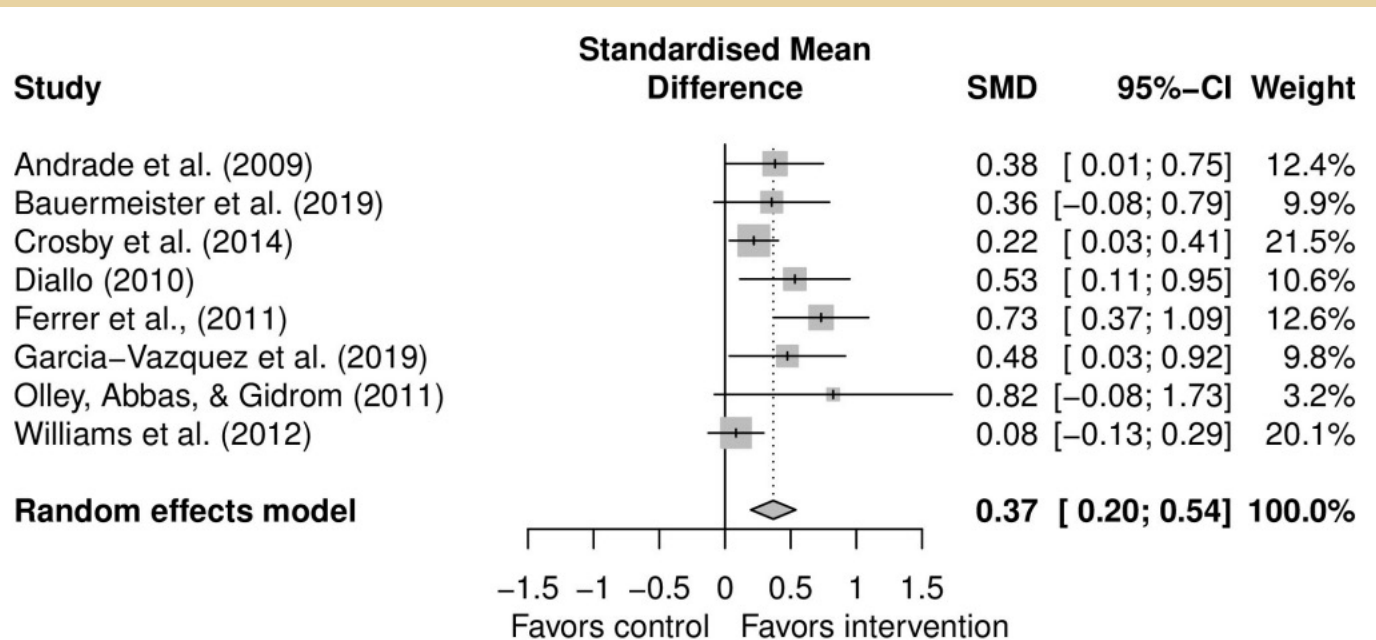
- > Sexual pleasure is a fundamental part of sexual rights as a matter of human rights
- > Sexual pleasure includes diverse sexual experiences
- > Sexual pleasure should be integrated into education, health promotion and service delivery, research, advocacy and policy



Incorporating pleasure into interventions to increase condom use increases condom use

Zaneva et al. PLOS One, 2022.

- > 33 interventions with 18886 participants
- > 25 were conducted in the U.S.
- > Able to meta-analyze 8 studies (6634 participants)



Operationalizing sexual pleasure for public health

Mitchell et al. Lancet Public Health, 2021.

> The people

- Assessment of interpersonal dynamics
 - > Consent, communication, negotiation, privacy, trust, bodily autonomy
- Sexual self-determination and confidence

> The events

- Key contextual factors of the sexual event
 - > Repertoire, timing, spacing of different sexual practices
 - > Occurrence of orgasm (if desired)
 - > How use of PrEP, doxyPEP, contraception, condoms impacts experiences of pleasure



Sexual justice: definitions and core concepts

World Association for Sexual Health, 2019; NCSO, 2024.



- > Promote sexual pleasure in law and policy as a fundamental part of sexual wellbeing, grounded in the principles of sexual rights as human rights



- > Ensure that comprehensive sexual education addresses sexual pleasure



- > Guarantee that sexual pleasure is integral to sexual health care services provision



Sexual justice: definitions and core concepts

World Association for Sexual Health, 2019; NCSO, 2024.



- > Enhance the development of rights-based, evidence-informed knowledge of the benefits of sexual pleasure



- > Re-affirm commitments to the recognition of diversity in sexual pleasure



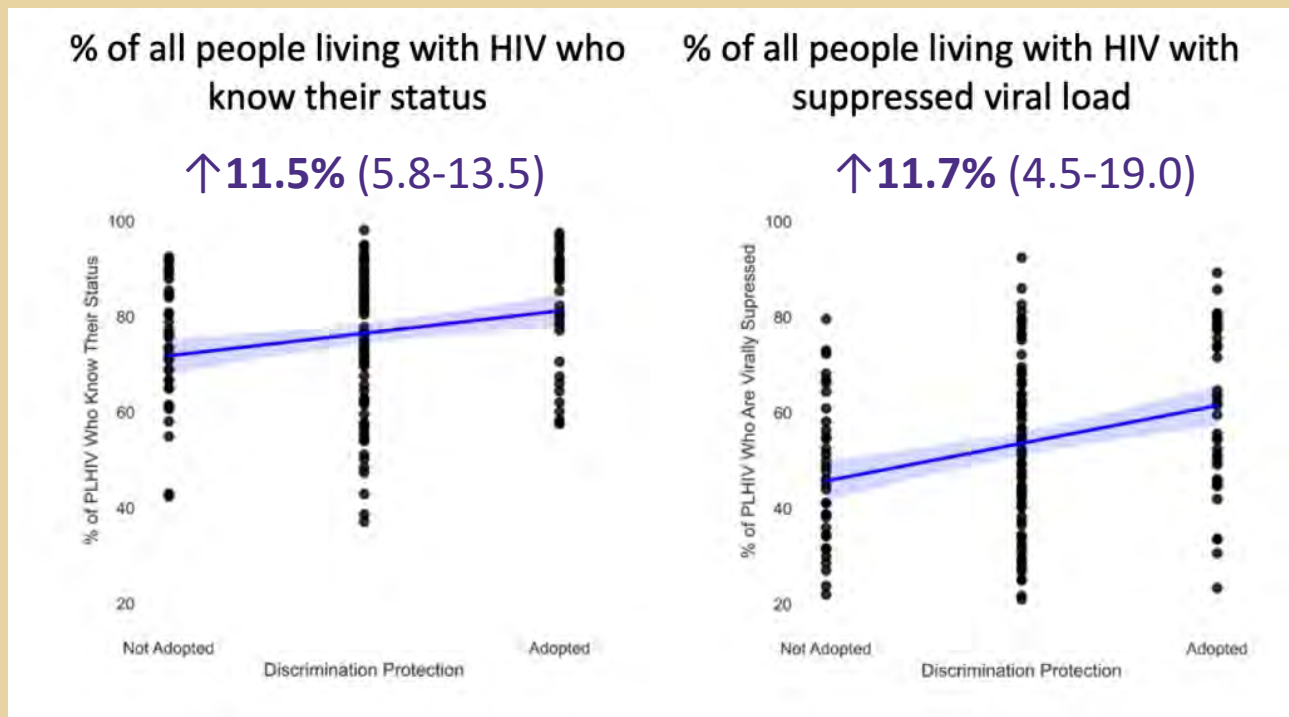
- > Commit to authentic partnership and power-sharing with communities for collective action

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Non-discrimination protections are associated with knowledge of HIV status and HIV viral suppression

Kavanaugh et al. BMJ Global Health, 2021.

- > 194 signatories to the global AIDS commitments
- > HIV Policy Lab data, 2020
- > 23% of countries have **non-discrimination protections** covering sexual orientation, gender identity, and HIV status



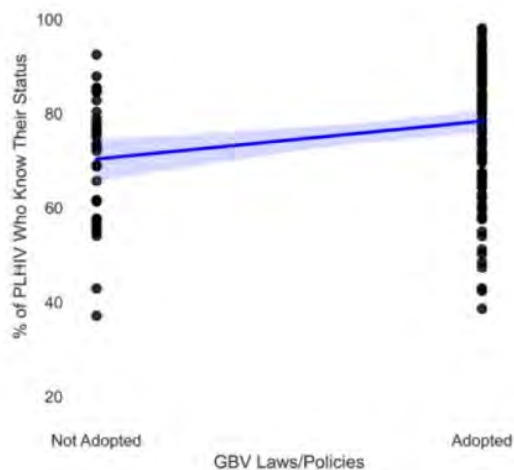
Protections against gender-based violence are associated with knowledge of HIV status and HIV viral suppression

Kavanaugh et al. BMJ Global Health, 2021.

- > 194 signatories to the global AIDS commitments
- > HIV Policy Lab data, 2020
- > 79% of countries have **enforceable laws against gender-based violence**

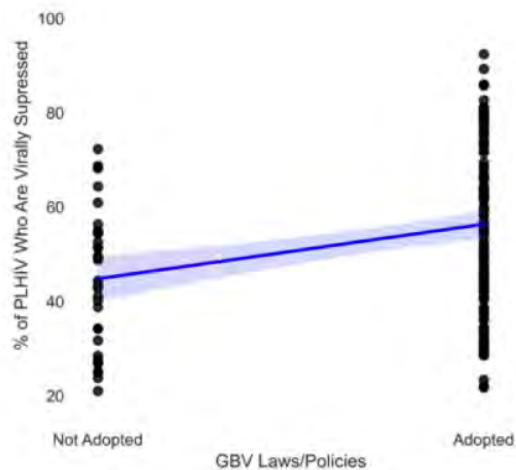
% of all people living with HIV who know their status

↑11.2% (5.4-18.2)



% of all people living with HIV with suppressed viral load

↑12.1% (5.1-19.0)



A model of sexual wellbeing: domains and definitions

Mitchell et al. Lancet Public Health, 2021.

Sexual safety and security

- Experience of reduced threat
- Actions to reduce vulnerability

Sexual respect

- Positive regard by others for one's sexual personhood

Sexual self-esteem

- Affective appraisals of oneself as a sexual being

Resilience

- Maintenance of equilibrium in response to sexual stress, dysfunction, adversity, or trauma

Forgiveness of past sexual experiences

- Halted patterns of self-blame, self-stigmatization, shame, avoidance, aggression, regret, and revenge

Self-determination

- Free choice or rejection of sexual partners, behaviors, context, and timing without pressure, force, or obligation

Comfort with sexuality

- Experience of ease in contemplation, communication, and enactments of sexuality and sex



A model of sexual wellbeing: potential public health measures

Mitchell et al. Lancet Public Health, 2021.

Sexual safety and security

- Little or no worry about future sex life
- Feeling safe with a sexual partner

Sexual respect

- Sexual identity and preferences are accepted by those around you and by the broader culture

Sexual self-esteem

- Feeling in control of sexual thoughts and desires
- Feeling good about one's body sexually

Resilience

- Having someone to talk to openly about one's sex life
- Bouncing back easily when something bad happens

Forgiveness of past sexual experiences

- Self-forgiveness about mistakes made in past sex life
- Forgiveness of others about things they've done to you in past sex life

Self-determination

- Only doing sexual activities one wants to do
- Not feeling pressured by others to do specific sexual activities

Comfort with sexuality

- Feeling focused or having a sense of flow during sex
- Absence of unwanted thoughts during sex and shame about sexual desires



Why sexual wellbeing?

Mitchell et al. Lancet Public Health, 2021.

- > A marker of health equity
- > A meaningful population indicator of wellbeing
- > Recognizes the effects of biopower on sex and sexuality
- > Captures population trends distinct from sexual health measures
- > Refocuses the ethics and practices of public health



Sexual wellbeing in clinical practice

The Pleasure Project Training Toolkit (April 2024)

The Pleasure Principles

Pleasure-based Sexual Health



**LOVE
YOURSELF**



**EMBRACE
LEARNING**



**TALK
SEXY**



**BE
FLEXIBLE**



**THINK
UNIVERSAL**



**RIGHTS
FIRST**



**BE
POSITIVE**

the
pleasure
project.

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Be sex positive

- > A sex-positive approach
 - Aims to improve the quality of [sexual] relationships and promote empowerment and consensual sexual interactions
 - Is “an attitude that celebrates sexuality as a part of life that can enhance happiness”
 - Is inclusive of and celebrates all bodies, genders, sexualities, and practices



Be sex positive

- > A sex-positive approach
 - Affirms freedom of sexual expression, sexual consent, bodily autonomy, integrity and privacy
 - Is trauma-informed and facilitates healing from prior [sexual] trauma
 - Incorporates sexual pleasure and rights into clinical policies and procedures



In practice, being sex positive might look like

My most pleasurable sexual experience was...

Consider the following:

Who were you with?

e.g. By yourself, your partner, a stranger?

Where were you?

e.g. On a day off, a beach, the kitchen table.

What other things made it so memorable?

e.g. We talked all night!

Was the experience part of something else?

e.g. Honeymoon, holiday fling.

What happened?

e.g. They looked so hot at the bus stop I couldn't stop looking over...

the
pleasure
project.
good safe sex

@thepleasureproj
thepleasureproject.org

- > Asking permission to talk about sex
- > Creating a safe environment
- > Choosing a good moment to talk about sex and pleasure
- > Sharing research on how sexual wellbeing is salubrious
- > Asking about ideal experiences
- > Leading with pleasure (over risk)

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#PrEP4Love for...

Dehlin et al. JMIR, 2019.

Curley et al. J Sex Res, 2022.



Increasing intimacy

- A desire for greater intimacy motivated PrEP uptake
- **“It’s just so much more intimate that I’m actually giving my body to somebody...”**

Increasing sexual options

- Broader possibility of sexual partners including PLWH
- Alleviating fear around receptive anal sex
- **“Sex has been liberating again thanks to PrEP”**

Removing barriers to physical closeness

- Sex on PrEP is more natural, providing deeper sensation than sex with condoms
- Greater sexual satisfaction

Reducing sexual anxiety and fear

- **“Who wants to be intimate and be in a state of terror?”**
- PrEP can transform **“sex = risk to sex = pleasure”**



The impact of U = U on sexual wellbeing

Prevention Access Campaign; [thewellproject](#); NZ Aotearoa HIV Action Plan



- > “We are getting married, we are enjoying intimate, loving relationships ... That has become my new normal.”
- > “Being undetectable means to me that everyday I can wake up and know that everything is going to be just fine.”
- > “U = U gives me and my HIV-negative partner hope to start a family together.”

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Talk sexy, honestly, clearly and accurately

NIAID HIV Language Guide, 2024

- > Get comfortable talking about sex and sexual practices
- > Find a balance between humor and seriousness
- > Avoid stigmatizing language
- > Don't be vague or use euphemism
- > Counter misinformation
- > Listen to what your patients tell you about their experiences without giving your opinion or judgement
- > Contextualize and be curious
- > Keep learning



Leading with sexual pleasure and wellbeing

GOALS Framework, 2023

- > **Is it okay if we talk a bit about your sex life?** I talk to all my patients about sex because it is such an important part of health. Some of my patients have questions or concerns about sex and I want to make sure that I can provide the information or other help they might need.
- > What questions do you have about sex?



Rules of thumb to discuss with patients

Dr. Milton Diamond



- > Be kind to each other. Treat the other person as a person and not only as a body.
- > Give your partner pleasure and accept that the other person gives you pleasure.
- > Do not assume it is “Yes” but always ask first and accept always when it is “No”.
- > Tell the other person what you like and don’t like.
- > Try to find a balance between lust, humor, seriousness, sensuality.

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Leading with sexual pleasure and wellbeing

- > On a scale from 0 to 10 [with 0 being not at all satisfied and 10 being completely satisfied], how satisfied are you with your sex life?
 - What would make it a 10?
- > What does your ideal sex life look like? How is your current sex life similar or different from what you imagined your ideal sex life to be?
- > How has being [undetectable, on PrEP, on doxyPEP] changed the sex that you're having?



Leading with sexual pleasure and wellbeing

- > How do you feel in your body while having sex?
- > How often do you feel focused and in the moment during sex?
- > What thoughts or feelings come up for you during sex?



Leading with sexual pleasure and wellbeing

- > How do you meet the people you have sex with?
- > Do you feel safe with your sexual partners?
- > How do you communicate what you like and don't like to new sex partners?



Leading with sexual pleasure and wellbeing

GOALS Framework, 2023

- > Reflect information back to make sure you have it right
- > Listen for information that might be helpful in creating a plan
- > Suggest a course of action for information sharing, testing, prevention (HIV, STI, pregnancy), counseling, safety planning, urology referral, pelvic PT



Conclusion

- > As refracted through the lens of medicine and public health, sexual health is characterized by themes of risk, surveillance, correction, control, and discipline
- > A result of biopower, narrow conceptualizations of sexual health perpetuate stigma, sustain inequities, and may do more harm than good
- > A framework that incorporates sexual pleasure, justice, and wellbeing as connected to but distinct from sexual health may promote greater population wellbeing



Thank you

Teaching Peer Evaluation for Dr.
Tim Menza



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