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# Integrating Sexuality Issues in Career Counseling: A Special Commentary

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The integration of sexual health and wellness competencies within the career counseling specialization is a crucial aspect of providing comprehensive support to clients. This integration holds significance in three key areas: clinical practice, research, and training. In clinical practice, addressing sexual health concerns that may impact career decisions can enhance the comprehensive support provided to clients. In research, exploring the relationship between sexual health and career development and satisfaction is crucial. Furthermore, incorporating sexual health and wellness competencies into training programs for career counselors is necessary to ensure practitioners have the knowledge and skills required to effectively support clients in this area. Ultimately, the prioritization of sexual health and wellness within the career counseling specialization has the potential to lead to improved overall well-being and career satisfaction for clients.

*Keywords:* counseling sexology, career counseling, intersectionality, LGBTQIA, sex work, commentary

## Introduction

Departing from traditional models that emphasized highly directive trait-and-factor approaches, contemporary theories of career counseling have largely paralleled the broader counseling profession's movement toward culturally responsive, individualized, and collaborative client care (Chronister, McWhirter, & Forrest, 2006). From this perspective, career counselors implement a holistic framework to explore the client's individual career development within the context of their unique sociopolitical environment. Given the well-researched relationships between overall life satisfaction and work-related quality of life (Mendes & Pereira, 2021), employee wellbeing, and job performance (Baptiste, 2008), there is evidence that sexual health and wellness, which plays a pivotal role in overall life satisfaction (Stephenson & Meston, 2013), may also impact the career development landscape (Kazemi, Mousavi, & Etemadifar, 2020). Using a framework of sex-positivity (Burnes, Singh, & Witherspoon, 2017) and intersectional career counseling (Chronister et al., 2006; Speciale & Scholl, 2019), the focus of this special commentary is to explore opportunities for the integration of sexuality in career-focused counseling, research, and education.

## Clinical Priorities

The clinical priorities for integrating sexuality into the career counseling specialization focus on understanding the ways in which clients' work life shapes and is shaped by their experiences of sex, intimacy, and relationships in their

personal lives. Sexual wellness involves a wide array of life issues (e.g., intimacy, identity, expression, safety, autonomy, and physical health; WHO, 2006) and the trajectory of one's work or career path is also often informed by these elements. Thus, the first tool in exploring this connection is the use of early and ongoing holistic assessment. Specifically, career counselors should begin new therapeutic relationships by normalizing the presence of sex and intimacy issues in clients' lives and by giving clients explicit permission to discuss topics of sex and intimacy throughout the counseling process. Counselors may also provide some basic psychoeducation to explain that a person's career path may be informed by their societal gender norms, internalized gender roles, relationship statuses, and family planning decisions. As an example, consider a cisgender lesbian client making a career change to a male-dominated field—the counselor may share information with the client about some of the common challenges experienced by sexual minority women in the workplace, which may prompt an opportunity to collaboratively develop a proactive plan for

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navigating her new work environment. Additionally, career counselors will want to ensure that they are utilizing culturally responsive career inventories and assessment tools that are inclusive to the unique experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals with diverse sociocultural identities, such as Zunker's (2015) six stage model of career and life planning, which has been endorsed for use with intersectional LGBTQIA+ clients (c.f., Speciale & Scholl, 2019). Goals of the assessment phase include: 1) understanding the relationship between clients' sexual/relational wellness and vocational satisfaction and 2) understanding the relationship between gender/sexual identities and vocational satisfaction. Adapting clinical applications of the PLISSIT (permission, limited information, specific suggestions, intensive therapy; Annon, 1976 model of sex therapy to career counseling provides a well-researched basis for improvement to overall well-being (Farshbaf-Khalili, Malakouti, Golizadeh, & Mirghafourvand, 2020).

Clinical priority is also given to understanding the myriad ways culture, power, and discrimination impact clients' career opportunities and decision making. Specifically, career counselors should possess knowledge of the workplace and employment barriers experienced by clients with minoritized sexual and gender identities, including clients who are LGBTQIA+, practice kink/BDSM and/or consensual non-monogamy, or involved in the sex work industry (Chronister et al., 2006). This awareness should also include the counselor's personal self-examination of any internalized biases or moral judgments about individuals with minoritized sexual and gender identities, coupled with intentional supervision and training on cross-cultural counseling and therapeutic bracketing. It is also crucial that career counselors are familiar with relevant resources for individuals with minoritized identities, such as Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and Lambda Legal.

### Research Priorities

There is an extreme paucity of research examining the connections between career identity, fulfillment, and satisfaction and sexual wellness. Specifically, further research is needed to explore the relationships between 1) personal sexual satisfaction and career satisfaction/performance, 2) internalized sexual identity acceptance/shame and career satisfaction/performance, and 3) gender-based harassment experiences in the workplace and sexual self-esteem/well-being. Additionally, the career satisfaction and sexual wellness of sex worker populations is severely under-researched in the counseling literature. Priority should be placed on exploring the experiences, barriers, and supports of individuals in the sex work industry, including career satisfaction, sexual well-being, and internalized sexual identity acceptance/shame.

### Training Priorities

Foremost, there is a strong need for the incorporation of sexual health and wellness topics in career counseling coursework, specifically with respect to the following CACREP (2015) student learning outcomes. Career counseling courses should include knowledge on the experiences of LGBTQIA+ employees and employees with other alternative sexualities (i.e., clients who practice kink/BDSM, ethical non-monogamous clients, clients involved in sex work) in various workplace settings, including limited employment opportunities, workplace discrimination, and issues with legal documentation (CACREP Section II, E, 2. Social and Cultural Diversity). Within Section II, E, 4. Career Development, training priorities should also include: 1) understanding theories and models of career development, counseling, and decision making that are inclusive to clients of diverse sexual and gender identities (c.f., Speciale & Scholl, 2019; Zunker, 2015); 2) understanding how holistic wellness, including sexual wellness, is impacted by work environment and vocational opportunities; and 3) understanding approaches for conceptualizing the interrelationships among and between work, mental well-being, relationships, and other life roles and factors for clients with diverse sexual and gender identities. Educators should also include information on how the conditions of the work environment impact LGBTQIA+ clients, clients with alternative sexualities, and sex worker clients, as well as knowledge of ethical and culturally relevant strategies for addressing career development for individuals with diverse gender and sexuality identities.

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