The Language of Sex Positivity
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Sex-negativity, the belief that sex is inherently bad, is one of our most deeply rooted convictions. It is so deeply intertwined with our cultural norms that it becomes difficult to even begin to explore it, much less find ways to change it. One of the more subtle ways it affects us is in the way we speak about sex, the words we use and even the words we have available to us. In turn, our language around sex reinforces sex-negativity. Just as developing a new set of words and theories to describe and then change the world is an integral part of any social movement, creating a new language to discuss sex is a necessary part of changing our attitudes towards sex. What makes this challenging is that, lacking the language, we have a difficult time even beginning to explore our ideas. This is a source of conflict and confusion that further frustrates our efforts.

Sex and food
As a sex educator, I need to be able to reduce this confusion in order for my message to be heard. One method I have found helpful is to compare sex and food. There's a lot of value in this; not only does it take much of the reaction out of the discussion, but the analogy works remarkably well and can be used to suit all sorts of situations. For example, you never know what you like until you try it, you might be in the mood for pizza one day and Chinese the next, and if you're going to have dinner with someone, you have to agree on what you'll be eating. I've used variations of this metaphor to teach people about safer sex, queer issues, poly issues, sexual assault and just about every other aspect of sexuality you could name. It's true that the analogy is not a perfect match, but it does remarkably well.

Try to imagine the following world: Accurate information about food is freely available and exists for all ages in appropriate ways. Talking about what sorts of food you like and negotiating with a dinner partner is a simple and relaxed experience. Different preferences, whether personal or cultural, are important for the information they provide and are no more or less important than hair color or family history, unless people are trying to figure out what to eat together. Some people prefer to eat with the same person indefinitely, others prefer to eat in a group and still others eat with a variety of partners as the mood suits them and nobody is ever forced to eat anything or with anyone. Each person is an expert in their desires and needs around food and their choices are respected.

While there are many examples of how our world is different from this food-positive one (as anyone who becomes vegetarian in a family of meat eaters knows,) it isn't too hard to imagine this place. Now go back through the last paragraph and substitute “sex” for “food” and “have sex” for “eat.” How much more difficult is this world to imagine? How much more work would it take to make this happen?

Sex-negativity keeps us us from moving towards this world. Some people also talk about erotophobia, the fear of sex. In many ways, they are really two sides of the same coin so I tend to conflate the two, but it can be useful to explore the two sides separately.

Defining sex-positivity
Working to break down sex-negativity is much like working to break down racism or homophobia- it's a process that takes a lifetime. Rather than being a goal you can reach, it's more like an asymptotic approach; no matter how close you are, you can always get a little closer. Although words like anti-racism exist to describe one version of this process, anti-sex-negativity is rather clumsy (as well and being a double negative) so most people call it sex-positivity.

One common definition of sex-positivity is that it's the belief that sex is good. Perhaps some of us would further describe the mind/body, male/female, good/bad division that various political and religious structures have adapted to their needs. However, it can be more useful to reframe our definition of sex-positivity from “sex is a positive thing” to “working towards a more positive relationship with sex.”

There are several different reasons for making this shift. First, it acknowledges that sex is neither good nor bad. Just like food, the benefit or harm comes from what you do and how it affects you. This takes the argument out of “sex is bad/sex is good,” no small feat when this has been where the whole discussion has stalled for so long. Second, it recognizes that sex is a subjective experience and we each have a different relationship with it. Third, and perhaps most salient, it holds on to the idea that our relationship with sex always has room for improvement. All of these can be compared to the ways some people with eating disorders can change the ways they see food, another way in which the food/sex analogy works.

Every single person in this society is raised to be sex-negative, just as every one of us is raised to be racist, homophobic, sexist, etc. Our patterns of behavior and beliefs are often so deeply rooted that we have difficulty even recognizing that a problem exists. However,
Why become sex-positive?

There are many reasons for working towards sex-positivity. First, and in some ways most importantly, it allows us to stop questioning our own normality. Read any sex advice column or book and you'll see two main types of questions, although there is quite a bit of overlap. The first are technique- or skills-related and are some version of the question, “How do I...?” The answers often read like a section from a cookbook; try this lube, position, or modification and see if it helps. The second type of question can be boiled down to “Is this normal?” Sometimes it refers to the person asking and sometimes it refers to their partner(s), but this question of normality is still at the root of it. In a sex-positive world, this second question would cease to have any meaning because we would each be normal FOR OURSELVES. It's normal for me to like milk chocolate and not dark, while other people are the other way around. This does not mean that I am normal, it means that liking milk chocolate is normal for me and I have no need to compare myself to anyone else on this issue. In a sex-positive world, it might be normal for you to like oral sex more than intercourse or erotic massage more than kissing and you would never feel the need for support around that. The range of sexual expression is more vast than we can really comprehend and the myth of normality only allows us a fairly narrow slice. In a sex-positive world, this wouldn't happen because sex-positivity removes our insecurities about being normal, at least as far as sex is concerned. We each have a normal sexuality and the fact that mine may not be similar to yours is only an issue if we want to find something we both like to do. Sex-positivity means we don't have to be like anybody else.

Secondly, sex-positivity lets us relax. In some ways, sex-negativity is like having an injury. We walk hunched to one side, restrict our movement and may even deny it's happening. Learning to heal, stretching our muscles, and physical therapy all hurt while they happen and when we're done, we find a freedom of movement that amazes and delights us. Setting sex-negativity aside is a similar phenomenon. It's a slow process, with setbacks and many new skills and habits to learn, but when it works, we become much more relaxed.

Third, and perhaps most relevant for polys, a sex-positive world would be poly-positive. What difference would it make how many partners you have, what their genders are or what your relationships look like as long as it makes everyone happy? Becoming sex-positive helps bring that world closer, both because we can create a microcosm of sex-positivity and because it presents an example that makes it easier for others to follow.

Lastly, sex-positivity helps us get what we want by allowing us to do the equivalent of trying new foods. Go to a new restaurant, buy a new cookbook, you might be surprised by what you like. This is especially important as our bodies change. Our society's vision of sex does not allow for aging, disability, the effects of medication, changing health or a myriad of other issues that affect our sexuality. In effect, we're telling ourselves that there's only one type of food we need and only one way to eat it. Not only can this get rather boring, one of the more common sexual issues people in long-term relationships face, it ignores the ways in which we change over time. Few of us eat the same foods at 16 years old and at 40. Why shouldn't our sexuality change as well? Sex-negativity has no room for this and millions of people suffer needlessly as a result. (Ask any sex- or couples therapist if you don't believe me.)

In fact, there are as many reasons to work towards sex-positivity as there are people willing to do so. What they all have in common is that they all involve creating a relationship with sex that is more positive than what we already have.

What sex-positivity looks like

So freedom from the myth of normality, a more realistic response to changing needs and the freedom to be ourselves are all strong reasons to work towards sex-positivity, but what would it look like? After all, many of us already consider ourselves sex-positive, so what's the problem? Part of the difficulty is that it's difficult to admit our internalized sex-negativity, just as it's difficult to admit homophobia or racism. Further complicating this are the barriers we create with our language when it comes to sex. In a similar way, homophobia could not be confronted until the words to describe it existed. By focusing on the way sex-positivity changes our language, we can begin to create an image of what it looks like in other areas.

Sex-positivity changes the way we speak in several ways. For example, consider our choice of expletives. What do we call people we're angry at? Among other things, cunts, dicks, and assholes. Why don't we call them elbows or ears? Because there's nothing wrong with those body parts. Why is it that if something bad happens we say that we're fucked or screwed or that it sucks? If some part of us didn't believe there was something wrong with those actions and organs, we wouldn't use them in these ways; every time we use sex words as expletives, we are reinforcing our own internalized sex-negativity. Trying to use other words is quite difficult and can change how we think about sex words in some remarkably subtle ways. Another way our language changes through sex-positivity is being able to use accurate words. Only in the area of sex do we consider it better to use less accurate language. We use terms like “sleep with” or “mess around,” slang which doesn't actually tell us anything. We assume we know what is meant by them, but when it comes right down to it, if someone asks us to make love, we still don't know what they like to do. Think about all of the words we have for eating- nibbling, wolfing, chewing, gulping, sipping, noshing- an entire catalog of different words and we usually agree on what they mean. Sex-positivity frees our voices and allows us to create and use the words we really mean.

By using clear language, we remove a veil from over our sexuality and our communication. How in the world are you going to get what you really want if you can't even say the words? It's like going to a restaurant and saying to the waiter, “Everything you have tastes good.” Or, “Bring me whatever you like.” Or even, “I like everything you're serving.” It sounds silly when reworded for this context, but many of us have heard equivalent sentences in a sexual setting. Now imagine being able to tell your partner something like, “I'd like you to run your tongue along the underside of my penis and gently squeeze my testicles.” Sex-negativity is what makes that different from, “I'm really in the mood for spicy food tonight. Let's go to that Italian place.”
Some people link being comfortable with sex with being comfortable with other bodily processes, especially menstruation, urination and defecation. (All things that happen “down there.”) These are all things that our bodies do that have been labeled as impolite to mention, if not downright bad, in part because of their proximity to our sex organs. As a result, a comfort level with one depends on being comfortable with the others. This does not mean that there are no rules of politeness in conversation; being comfortable with food does not mean there aren't times when eating or talking about eating is inappropriate. Similarly, being comfortable with menstruation does not mean it's always an acceptable topic of conversation; it means that there are some occasions when it is. Historically, much of our sex-negativity comes from the same places as our body-negativity, so overcoming one often involves overcoming the other.

In many ways, learning to break sex-negativity down is linked to working to end other prejudices. Sex-negativity is used to enforce sexism every time a woman is insulted by being called a slut. The myth that people of African descent are hypersexual and are therefore less developed than those of European descent clearly depends on the idea that sex is bad. Every time we're shocked that our elders are sexual beings, sex-negativity reinforces ageism and it's certainly one of the roots of homophobia, which is based on some peoples’ sexuality not being within the allowed norms. While these examples are certainly over-simplified, it's easy to see that sex-negativity is braided into all of our prejudices and conversely, our other prejudices inform and help define our sex-negativity, so it's not surprising that working towards ending one requires working towards ending the others. Perhaps it's more accurate to say that not working towards ending all of them limits how far we can work towards ending any of them. Working to change the way we talk about sex is a challenging and useful task and it's important to acknowledge that it's only one piece of sex-positivity. Learning about and experimenting with the wide range of human sexual expression, becoming comfortable with our bodies, and developing sexual negotiation skills are just the tip of the iceberg. However, learning to talk about sex more clearly and thoughtfully is a crucial part of many of these processes, without which our other efforts stall.

**A philosophy of sex-positivity**

Whether we've stopped to think about it or not, each of us has a philosophy of sex. Although there are many variations on the theme, for the majority of us in this culture, that philosophy assumes that there is something wrong with sex. It is something to be feared or endured. It’s inextricably linked with sin or pain. It's part of our animalistic nature and must be overcome. It's not rational or logical. It's a necessary evil. Some types of sex are good while the rest are bad. Even those of us who are not sex-negative on an intellectual level have internalized many of these messages.

Ultimately, sex-positivity means creating a new philosophy of sex. While I have described some of the ways I think it might look, it's difficult to predict what it will eventually be or how we will get there. At the same time, although I don't know what the end result will be, I consider changing our language to be a reasonable starting point. The challenges that doing so creates will show us where the next steps need to be.

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"Sex-positive" respects each of our unique sexual profiles, even as we acknowledge that some of us have been damaged by a culture that tries to eradicate sexual difference and possibility.[7] It’s the cultural philosophy that understands sexuality as a potentially positive force in one’s life, and it can, of course, be contrasted with sex-negativity, which sees sex as problematic, disruptive, dangerous. Sex-positivity allows for and in fact celebrates sexual diversity, differing desires and relationships structures, and individual choices based on consent.[8] Would you convert to the sex-positive philosophy? Or do you reject the idea that the mainstream is as restrictive and negative as this alternative view makes it out to be? And, as an aside, what would you do if your partner came to you with the hypothetical suggestion sex-positivity could be the key to a better love life? ‘Course that might be a whole other can of worms. BTW: A note on last week’s Dear James entry The sex positive movement makes no moral distinctions when it comes to sex. As long as it’s consensual, anything goes. Before moving to Portland, Oregon, I had never heard the term “sex-positive.” Then I started dating a man who identified as polyamorous and sex positive, polyamory being the practice of seeking and maintaining multiple romantic and sexual relationships simultaneously. Given SexPositive Portland’s discreet and warm-hearted approach to sex-positivity, it’s hard to think of a reason why social media platforms would ban the group, especially because, as Cordova says, “It’s not just about sex.” When people are having the kinds of relationships that they want, they’re happier, Cordova tells me.