Three Crises Facing Sexology

Leonore Tiefer, Ph.D.

Three crises facing sexology are described: what is happening with sexuality in the culture, what is happening with sexuality in academia, and what is happening with sexuality in medicine. In each case, the response of sexology has been benign neglect, disinterest, and a failure to understand the profound implications of these challenges for a field that considers itself the premiere source of accurate facts and comprehensive theories about sexuality. As a consequence we are losing control of our subject matter, and we are losing our professional legitimacy. A wake-up call is offered for sexologists to become more knowledgeable, for our paradigms and organizations to become more inclusive, and for our research methods to become more sophisticated.

KEY WORDS: medicalization of sexuality; psychobiosocial model; theory of sexuality; sexuality and culture; postmodernism; social constructionism; phallocentrism.

INTRODUCTION

For my Presidential message, I want to describe several important crises facing sexology. These crises have placed sexology in danger of losing control of its subject matter and reputation. There is more than a small danger of our field fragmenting. Crises can sometimes be constructive, and in our case I think they are overdue and may lead to some very valuable transformations. But, fragmenting would be a sorry turn of events, and I hope my warnings can result in timely reforms.

1This paper, slightly modified, was originally delivered as the Presidential Address to the International Academy of Sex Research, June 1993, Asilomar Conference Center, Pacific Grove, California.

2To whom correspondence should be addressed at Department of Urology, Montefiore Medical Center, Bronx, New York 10467.
Each of the three issues I describe has been brought home to me recently in a particularly forceful way, so let me begin by explaining how I have come to see these issues as "crises."

The urgency of the first issue, what is happening with *sexuality in the culture*, has been made apparent by a hobby, some might say an obsession, of mine. For many years, I have cut and filed articles from *The New York Times* and various other magazines and newsletters having to do with sexuality. Occasionally, I amuse myself by going back to read what the Pope said about sexual pleasure in 1978 or what the media were worrying about in terms of sex roles or children and sex in 1982. But, *I can't keep up any-more!* What once was a nice, steady trickle turned into a big and growing wave and has become a terrifying deluge. Newspapers and magazine covers continuously headline "lesbian chic" or "the politics of date rape on campus" or "new home roles for fathers" or "what the Navy is doing about sexual harassment." The week before this speech, both major American newsmagazines had sex as their cover stories. The June 21, 1993 *Newsweek* headlined "Lesbians: Coming out strong; What are the limits of tolerance?" on its cover, and the June 21, 1993 *Time* warned "Sex for sale: An alarming boom in prostitution debases the women and children of the world" on its cover. The same week, the *New York Daily News* of June 18, 1993, had a photograph of St. Patrick's Cathedral on its cover, with the headline "Church sex crisis: Catholic bishops move to restore trust, credibility." The tremendous avalanche of publicity about sex seems to be out of hand, and we need to understand what this means.

The urgency of discussing the second issue, what is happening with *sexuality in academia*, was brought home to me earlier this month at the 9th Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, held at Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY. This large and influential conference meets every 3 years. Sexology was the subject of one session that focused on the work of several contemporary clinicians and researchers. The speakers argued that sexology's work has served to regulate and repress women's and gay people's sexuality. What upset me was not the content, a caricatured and stereotyped portrayal of some important biological and developmental work about homosexuality, but the disparaging tone in which the critique was delivered. What I learned was that it is permissible to ridicule sexology at a professional historical conference. This is a serious problem that sexologists need to understand and address.

Finally, I feel increasing urgency concerning a third problematic area, the ongoing *medicalization of sexuality*. There is no new crisis here, only a constantly escalating one, with each year more sexologists joining medical and surgical departments and studying sexuality only through the medical paradigm. Each year medical people make larger claims to legitimacy and