



The New Attack on Sexuality Research: Morality and the Politics of Knowledge Production¹

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Abstract: This article describes and analyzes recent attempts to construct *moral panic* about publicly funded sexuality research in the United States, including pressure to eliminate funding for research on sexual topics with public health relevance. At the same time, the article relates the events to other recent cases in which conservative politicians, policy makers, and advocacy groups have sought to shape the production and dissemination of knowledge about sexuality. I argue that these controversies should be approached simultaneously as moral struggles around sexual norms and as credibility struggles around knowledge production. I examine the difficulties involved in articulating strong defenses of sexual knowledge production in response to such attacks, and I emphasize the limits inherent in the strategy of rallying around the autonomy of science and protesting the intrusion of politics into science. These problems point to important strategic dilemmas for activism and policy work related to sexuality and demand a rethinking of the grounds for public participation in scientific debate.

Key words: credibility struggles; sexual norms; autonomy of science; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; traditional values; censorship; AIDS activism

In July 2003 the U.S. House of Representatives came within two votes of revoking the funding previously granted by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to four research projects on topics related to sexuality and health. Congressman Pat Toomey, a Republican from Pennsylvania and the author of the amendment, remarked, "I ask my colleagues, who thinks this stuff up?" He was referring to studies of San Francisco sex workers and masseuses, American Indian and Alaskan transgendered individuals, the sexuality of older men, and the relation of mood arousal to sexual risk taking (Fram, 2003). Within a few months a "hit list" of 157 sexuality researchers—compiled by the Traditional Values Coalition, a self-described "grassroots church lobby" based in

Southern California renowned for its attacks on "the gay agenda"—was winding its way through Congress and the NIH. "There needs to be some adult supervision at NIH," said Andrea Lafferty, the executive director of the Traditional Values Coalition and daughter of its founder, the Reverend Lou Sheldon. "Nameless, faceless bureaucrats [are] doling out money like a federal ATM" on "smarmy projects" that don't "pass the straight-face test," Lafferty told the press (Weiss, 2003, p. A21). NIH program officers contacted researchers on the list and asked them to come up with language justifying their funded grants and explaining the contributions of their research to the promotion of public health.² This scrutiny sparked a range of protests by professional and policy associations,

¹A different version of this article (Epstein, in press) appears in *The Sexual Self: The Construction of Sexual Scripts*, edited by Michael Kimmel (in press).

²I want to note that although I am not named on the hit list, I am a coinvestigator on one study included on it. I also have personal ties to individuals named on the list.

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advocacy groups, and liberal politicians; it even proved sufficiently newsworthy to generate an episode of the NBC hit television show *West Wing* (Junge & Welles, 2004). (While borrowing many details from the actual events, the television script enhanced the quotient of prime-time drama by supposing that one of the labs whose funding was threatened just happened to employ the president's own daughter, a researcher on sexually transmitted infections.)

Because the attack on sexuality research appeared to garner support from within both Congress and the executive branch, it seemed of a piece with a number of incidents that have unfolded during the presidency of George W. Bush. These incidents concerned the work of various agencies within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), which also contains the NIH. They have included a crackdown by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on the use of federal funds by community-based AIDS prevention organizations perceived to be promoting sexuality (Block, 2003, pp. 5–6; Smith, 2003); an unwillingness on the part of the CDC to endorse the efficacy of condoms in preventing the spread of HIV (Cocco, 2002); a decision by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to overrule its expert advisory panel and ban a morning-after contraceptive pill (Harris, 2004); the institution of a DHHS policy limiting attendance by government scientists at international AIDS conferences (“U.S. Charged,” 2004; Walgate, 2004); and attempts by the DHHS to impose ideological litmus tests when appointing experts to scientific advisory panels (Steinbrook, 2004; Zitner, 2002). Strikingly, several of these efforts seemed to target not only sexual ideas and practices deemed dangerously liberal but also the scientific practices responsible for generating and disseminating knowledge about sexuality in the first place. In response, defenders of sexuality research mostly pursued a strategy that I will argue is problematic, namely, a spirited defense of the autonomy of science.

Conservative critics of sexuality research sought to build broad support for their attacks—for example, the Traditional Values Coalition placed sexuality research as the lead item on its Web page for several weeks, ahead of its usual staples and hot-button issues such as gay marriage. However, because public preoccupation with the issue was neither widespread nor long-lasting, one might say that conservatives didn't quite succeed in creating a full-fledged *moral panic*. Still, the NIH episode, along with some of the other incidents noted above, demonstrated many of the classic features of such panics, including the disproportionate preoccupation with some imagined threat, the incitement of popular hysteria by *moral entrepreneurs*, the

singling out of designated scapegoats, and the attempts, ultimately, to restrict rights and forms of expression (Cohen, 1980; Freedman, 1989; Herdt, 2005; Rubin, 1984; Rubin, 2005; Weeks, 1989, p. 14).

In this article I will move beyond a consideration of the politics of sexual morality by arguing that these cases must also be viewed as episodes in the politics of knowledge. Like other contests over knowledge making, they can be studied as *credibility struggles* (Epstein, 1996)—the competition to establish knowledge claims as believable and their claimants as authoritative. Since, as the sociologist of science Steven Shapin (1995) argued, “no scientific claim ‘shines with its own light’—carries its credibility with it,” scholars have “become intensely interested in the specific processes of argumentation and political action whereby claims come to be accepted as true or rejected as false” (p. 305).

The features of scientific credibility struggles are highly variable and case-specific. One particular aspect of the controversies described here is that they concern not just the production of knowledge about sexuality but also what sociologist of science Stephen Hilgartner (2003) has called the *production of the unknowable*—the social processes through which things are rendered unavailable to our understanding. Or as the historian of science Robert Proctor (1995) asked, in another context:

Why do we know what we know, and why don't we know what we don't know? If the politics of science consists (among other things) in the structure of research priorities, then it is important to understand what gets studied and why, but also what does *not* get studied and why not. One has, in other words, to study the social construction of ignorance. (p. 8)

“Ignorance,” noted Proctor, “has a distinct and changing political geography that is often an excellent indicator of the politics of knowledge” (p. 8). Of course, as Foucault (1980) has reminded us, non-knowing about sex typically is accompanied not by silence but by a voluble proliferation of discourses, and that is certainly the case in the heated episodes described here.

In the pages that follow, I reconstruct the recent debates over sexual knowledge making and non-knowledge making in order to suggest the connections between public debates about sexual morality as described by analysts of sexuality and credibility struggles as described by analysts of science. In addition, I examine the difficulties involved in articulating strong defenses of sexual knowledge production in response to the fomenting of panic and I criticize as inadequate the dominant oppositional strategy—namely, rallying around the autonomy of science

and protesting the intrusion of politics into science. Instead, with reference to the example of AIDS treatment activism, I call for the development of new criteria for evaluating public participation in scientific knowledge production.

Historical Precedents

When attending to the particularities of present-day debates about sexuality and sexual knowledge, it is worth considering the stigmatized character of research on human sexuality throughout the past century in the United States. In an assessment of sexuality research, Diane di Mauro (1995) observed that as early as 1921, the National Research Council complained of difficulties in obtaining support for such studies (p. 8). In the 1950s and 1960s, according to Janice Irvine (2003):

Sexologists were routinely attacked for studying sexuality. The Rockefeller Foundation terminated the funding of Alfred Kinsey in 1954 after a Congressional investigation prompted by public outrage over the publication of *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953). . . . Mary Calderone, who founded the Sex Information and Education Council of the United States in 1964 to advocate for objective sexuality research and education, was denounced as a communist and a pervert as a result of her efforts. (p. 451)

The advent of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s brought substantial federal funding to sexuality researchers, though not always without controversy. In 1987 sociologists John Gagnon, Edward Laumann, and Robert Michael responded to a NIH request for research proposals on the topic of "Social and Behavioral Aspects of Health and Fertility-Related Behaviors." The investigators won a contract to design a comprehensive national survey of adults on sexual attitudes and behaviors related to reproductive health and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS. At a time when the AIDS epidemic was finally being recognized as a substantial threat to the U.S. population, the study proposed to use sophisticated techniques of data collection and analysis to fill the yawning gaps in knowledge about sexual beliefs and practices and their relation to the risk of HIV transmission. In 1989 after extensive pretesting of their survey instrument, the researchers submitted their survey to the federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB) for review—normally a formality (Laumann, Michael, & Gagnon, 1994b, pp. 34–35).

This time, however, a well-orchestrated attack was unleashed after word got out that the OMB was reviewing a "sex questionnaire." One published account of these

events, by Morton Hunt (1999), quoted Gagnon's surmise that "we and our plans were being tracked by the Right." In Hunt's analysis, after the 1988 election conservatives were "well represented within [the DHHS] and other government agencies." Indeed, "it might have been an inside source at OMB that tipped off *Science* that it was reviewing a federally funded sex questionnaire" (p. 186). *Science* magazine trivialized the news by reporting it alongside a picture (from the film *Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice*) of two couples in a king-size bed. This depiction caught the attention of the mass media, which then publicized the proposed study (Laumann et al., 1994b, p. 35).

Ultraconservatives in Congress, including Senator Jesse Helms and Congressman William Dannemeyer, denounced the study as an unwarranted intrusion into private matters as well as an attempt to promote the agenda of the gay movement and vilified its lead investigators. In response to mobilization by a Christian radio station, phone calls from opponents of the research bombarded the OMB (Laumann et al., 1994b, p. 35). Ultimately, Helms introduced an amendment to a budget bill that took the money targeted both for the survey and for a large study of adolescent fertility and sexuality and reallocated it to abstinence education (Ericksen, 1999, p. 205). This transfer of \$10 million in federal funding passed the Senate with the support of two thirds of its members but was deleted by a House-Senate conference committee. However, in 1993 both houses passed and signed into law a provision backed by Helms that permanently banned federal funding of these two studies (Hunt, 1999, pp. 190–191).³

Analysts of moral panics on sexual topics have noted the frequent inclination and capacity of entrepreneurial individuals to advance disparate agendas through the designation of sexual scapegoats: Such entrepreneurs manage to suggest that society's ills stem from some particular set of sexually problematic individuals or groups (Freedman, 1989; Herdt, 2005; Levine, 2002; Nathan & Snedeker, 1995; Rubin, 1984, 2005). This body of research has left it somewhat unclear whether sexuality is really the target of these moral entrepreneurs or whether sexuality simply provides a convenient diversion in an opportunistic struggle to advance a political agenda. Most likely

³Meanwhile, Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels (1994a) had managed to piece together partial funding from a number of private foundations and were then able to complete a scaled-down version of their original proposal, which became the National Health and Social Life Study, published in 1994 as *The Social Organization of Sexuality*. This is an abbreviated account of the events (for more extended discussions, see di Mauro, 1995, pp. 8–12; Ericksen, 1999, pp. 80–89; Hunt, 1999, pp. 185–191; Laumann et al., 1994b).

the simple answer is that often both are true.⁴ In the case of the Helms/Dannemeyer offensive, there can be little doubt that the attack on these studies was in some measure opportunistic, as opponents sought to make political hay of various kinds. For example, in the account of these events in her book analyzing the history of sex research in the United States, Julia Ericksen (1999) noted that “many conservatives opposed all federally funded research”—not just research on sexuality—“and saw this survey as a chance to garner support for their views” (p. 182).

But if the attacks reflected a measure of opportunism, that does not mean that their attention to sexuality was incidental. Despite the diversity of targets, certainly a large part of what was at stake was the competition over sexual mores, or what William Simon and John Gagnon once called *cultural scenarios*, regarding sexuality—“the instructional guides that exist at the level of collective life” (Simon & Gagnon, 1984, p. 53; see also Gagnon, 2004, pp. 138–142). For example, the contention that sex research was an improper intrusion into the private lives of Americans sought to shore up a cultural scenario in which sexuality was conceived of as something shameful or dangerous that must be kept as well hidden as possible. Even more specifically, however, the debate was over the legitimacy of producing knowledge that would inform such scenarios. In a letter to DHHS Secretary Louis Sullivan, Congressman Dannemeyer expressed the clear concern that the generation of detailed knowledge about the demographics of sexual orientation might legitimate same-sex sexuality in the United States: “Imagine the political landscape if any one demographic grouping were to increase their rank from 10% of the population to 15% or 20%,” wrote Dannemeyer. “This is the exact reason why the purveyors of laissez-faire sexual attitudes want to use tax dollars and the federal cloak of scientific legitimacy to produce this work” (Ericksen, 1999, p. 188). These and other themes resurfaced a decade later in the debates over sexuality research in the George W. Bush administration.

The Hit List

In their own analysis of their experience with the DHHS and Congress, Laumann, Gagnon, and Michael (1994b) described the unwritten rules of censorship in federal funding. Calls for proposals routinely avoided use

of “the plain English word ‘sex’” and substituted for it such convoluted euphemisms as “proximate determinants of fertility” or “fertility-related behavior.” The researchers noted as well: “We, too, have played by these rules” (p. 37). Nearly a decade later in April 2003—in a harbinger of what was to come—program officers at the NIH began advising their grant applicants to avoid a long list of terms in the titles and abstracts of their grants, lest their research come under special scrutiny either by Congress or by administrators within the DHHS. Terms to be shunned included “sex worker,” “men who have sex with men,” “anal sex,” and “needle exchange.” For example, a researcher at the University of California reported being told by his program officer that the abstract of the grant he intended to submit “should be ‘cleansed’ and should not contain any contentious words like ‘gay’ or ‘homosexual’ or ‘transgender’” (Goode, 2003, p. A10). The attention specifically to titles and abstracts of grants was revealing, for those were the portions of NIH grants that appeared in a publicly accessible database called CRISP. One NIH official who spoke with a *New York Times* reporter on the condition of anonymity acknowledged that the advice to avoid controversial terms was not new, but that the amount of scrutiny directed at NIH grants under the George W. Bush administration was “much worse and more intense” (Goode, 2003, p. A10).⁵

Program officers’ concerns proved well founded. A few months later, Congressman Toomey’s amendment to defund four approved studies on sexuality failed by a vote of 212–210, with 177 Republicans and 33 Democrats voting in favor (Agres, 2003). Meanwhile, a staff member working for another Republican member of Congress, Mark Souder from Indiana, sent an e-mail message to the NIH complaining about the funding of research on prostitutes. Souder’s office requested detailed information about who had reviewed these studies and what scores they had received (Kaiser, 2003b, p. 403). Then, in October 2003 at a meeting with NIH Director Elias Zerhouni, several members of Congress grilled the director about “provocative” NIH research projects and demanded explanations. Zerhouni followed up by asking for a precise list of studies that were at issue. Apparently

⁴Similarly, there has been debate over whether moral panics should be understood as irrational, emotional outbursts or as calculated, rational behavior. As Janice Irvine has argued, the way to advance this debate is to understand emotions in properly sociological terms as meaningful social behavior (Irvine, 2005b; see also Jasper, 2003).

⁵However, the point is not to suggest that Democratic administrations, such as the preceding one of Bill Clinton, have been strongly supportive of, and comfortable with, sexuality research. Elsewhere (Epstein, 2003) I have argued that increased receptivity on the part of DHHS officials during the Clinton administration to health research on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) health issues depended very much on a desexualizing of the topic of LGBT health—a focus on sexual identity as a status rather than on sexual practices.

by mistake, a staff member in the office of Congressman Billy Tauzin, a Republican from Louisiana and the chair of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, supplied Zerhouni not with the 10 specific studies under discussion but with a much more extensive list of 157 researchers and their funded research projects—a list that had been provided to Congress, it turned out, by the Traditional Values Coalition (TVC) (Kaiser, 2003a, p. 758; Russell, 2003; Shane, 2003).

The hit list, as it was quickly dubbed by Democratic member of Congress Henry Waxman, who became instrumental in opposing it, included studies funded since 1997 that were being conducted by researchers from prominent institutions across the United States (Brainard, 2003). It appeared to reflect an organized effort to document federal funding going to sexuality researchers. Indeed, a number of senior luminaries in the field (some of them deceased) were listed alongside the commentary, “Nothing found on HHS search,” suggesting that the TVC had combed the CRISP database not only for keywords but also for the names of eminent individuals.⁶

The TVC, along with the broader Christian fundamentalist movement that they represent, were important players in the struggle to shore up or establish hegemonic cultural scenarios regarding sexuality. Their notations appearing alongside investigators’ names on the HHS Grant Projects list made clear which messages about sex they wanted to target. “Promotes a ‘sex-positive’ attitude among teens” was the TVC’s characterization of one study; “Queries 9th graders on their ‘current and past sexual behavior’” was the description of a second one. In yet another case, TVC observed: “Study reads, ‘Cohabitation is recognized as an important feature of family formation and children’s well being.’” Just as pointedly, the TVC’s notations made clear which sorts of sexual topics they considered better simply not to know about: the sex and drug networks of U.S. truckers; sexual identity formation among young gay male Puerto Ricans; sexual activity in sex clubs and bathhouses; commercial sex work; the sexuality of immigrants; the demographics of gay and lesbian households; experiences of homophobia as a predictor of unprotected sex. Thus, the TVC’s ideological project linked the politics of knowledge making (or non-knowledge making) with the fierce protection of what they perceived as traditional cultural scenarios about sex. However, as their list of suspect objects of scientific scrutiny made evident,

the issue was never just sexuality, but its complex articulation with the broader politics of difference and inequality in the United States, including questions of gender, race, ethnicity, and nation. In a favorable political climate and given the right conjunction of political circumstances, the influence of these conservatives proved to be considerable.

At the same time, the conservative attack on NIH-funded research provoked a diverse and vigorous response—from sympathetic members of Congress, from advocacy and policy organizations committed to sexuality research as an avenue toward better sexuality policy, and from groups concerned with science policy and the defense of good science. A full-fledged credibility struggle over the production of sexual knowledge ensued. Mobilization among the defenders was aided by a wave of publicity about the controversy. In response to the query from Congress, NIH program officers contacted those scientists on the hit list with active grants and asked them to craft short statements explaining the public health significance of their work. Though the NIH probably hoped thereby to defuse the crisis, the very act of contacting so many researchers around the country launched a blitz of media reports and editorials. Concerned about the prospect of an expanded assault on peer-reviewed science, professional organizations soon rallied in defense of the NIH. The Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) was one of many such organizations that objected to “efforts to subject the NIH research portfolio and individual research grants to ideological litmus tests” (AAMC, 2003, ¶2). Alan Leshner, the head of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), published a strongly worded editorial in the organization’s flagship publication, *Science*, warning that “the moralizers are trying to muck with U.S. science again” (Leshner, 2003, p. 1479). The Consortium of Social Science Associations, a national advocacy organization, created a Coalition to Protect Research consisting of dozens of professional associations and advocacy groups. Along with the AAAS and others, the coalition organized a congressional briefing “to educate and inform Members [of Congress] of the important public health significance of sexual health research” (Coalition to Protect Research, 2004b, ¶1).

Defenders of the NIH in Congress also took action. Congressman Waxman, in an angry letter to DHHS Secretary Tommy Thompson, accused government insiders of working in conjunction with conservatives in Congress to sabotage scientific research (Waxman, 2003). However, Lafferty, the director of the TVC, sent Waxman a letter in response, telling him: “Congressman, if you think you are mad wait until you see how angry the

⁶The list ended up circulating among academic researchers, and I was able to obtain a copy. It was entitled only HHS Grant Projects, and it appeared to be the printout of a computer spreadsheet program.

American people get when they discover that you and your allies at NIH have been using federal tax dollars to study 'lot lizards'—prostitutes who service truckers in parking lots" (TVC, 2003, ¶2). Lafferty sought to generate as much publicity as possible from the brouhaha, telling the Associated Press: "We know for a fact that millions and millions of dollars have been flushed down the toilet over years on this HIV, AIDS scam and sham" (Russell, 2003, p. A3).

In the end, the NIH—institutionally committed to the preservation of its own decision-making autonomy, if not to sexuality research per se—came to the defense of the researchers under attack. In January 2004 NIH Director Zerhouni responded to Congress describing the results of a "comprehensive review of the human sexuality research that we support." Standing behind the research, Zerhouni noted: "The constant battle against illness and disease . . . cannot be limited to biological factors but has to include behavioral and social factors as well" (Zerhouni, 2004, p. 2). An appended summary described the public health relevance of particular studies that had been featured in the public debate, beginning with the Emory University study of HIV risk among long-haul truckers that had earned Lafferty's scornful condemnation (Zerhouni, 2004; see also Grady, 2004; Kaiser, 2004).

However, those who may have thought the matter settled were caught off guard the following September, when Congressman Randy Neugebauer, a Republican from Texas, sponsored an amendment to the annual DHHS appropriations bill to defund two NIH studies he deemed frivolous (neither of them, however, on topics related to sexuality—and, ironically, both of them already completed). This time the amendment passed the House on a voice vote of members present, but it then failed to gain comparable support in the Senate (Coalition to Protect Research, 2004a, 2004c; Keiger, 2004). Neugebauer tried again to defund two other grants in 2005, and the amendment once again passed the House on a voice vote (Haley, 2005).

Sex and Science

Waxman was by no means alone in suspecting that congressional critics of NIH funding had their allies within the DHHS and the Bush administration generally. A number of analysts have tended to interpret the NIH episode as consistent with a broader recent pattern: a war on science and truth by an ideologically driven administration more concerned with its predetermined beliefs than with any inconvenient facts that threaten them ("Bush-League Lysenkoism," 2004). At his Web site, www.politicsand-science.org, Congressman Waxman has documented

dozens of examples of such tinkering with science, from global warming to contaminated drinking water to missile defense. In February 2004 the Union of Concerned Scientists (2004a) issued a statement claiming that the Bush administration had disregarded the principle that scientific evidence "should always be weighed from an objective and impartial perspective to avoid perilous consequences" (¶1). Since then, more than 5,000 scientists, including 48 Nobel laureates, have endorsed the organization's statement (Union of Concerned Scientists, 2004b). Scientists have taken particular exception to attempts by administration officials to pack governmental advisory committees with rightward-leaning experts. Potential appointees have complained of being interrogated about their views on topics such as abortion, stem cell research, and human cloning and of being asked to reveal whether they voted for George W. Bush (Steinbrook, 2004). "I don't think any administration has penetrated so deeply into the advisory committee structure as this one," said Donald Kennedy, a past president of Stanford University and editor in chief of *Science* (Zitner, 2002). This topic so galvanized the scientific community that the National Academy of Sciences took it up in a report on the appointment process for scientific advisers: "It is inappropriate to ask [nominees] to provide nonrelevant information, such as voting record, political-party affiliation, or position on particular policies," the report declared (National Academy of Sciences, 2004, p. 10).

It makes sense to locate the attack on sexuality research in relation to a broader disdain by some conservatives for "inconvenient" science. Some in the present administration may have (in the memorable words of a senior adviser to the president, quoted by reporter Ron Suskind [2004]) rejected the worldview of the "reality-based community" of people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality," in favor of the metaphysical presumption that "we're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality" (p. 44). But is a casual—or motivated—disregard of science the best or the only frame for understanding the events I have recounted? It is worth noting just how many instances of interference by DHHS agencies with the conduct of science have been related specifically to the topic of sexuality.

Condoms

In July 2001 a fact sheet on condoms mysteriously disappeared from a CDC Web site. Eventually it was replaced by one that stressed that condoms may not be reliable (Cocco, 2002). In December 2002 U.S. officials at an international conference in Bangkok argued against a

recommendation for “consistent condom use” to fight AIDS and other diseases—prompting *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof to wonder if the administration supported only “inconsistent condom use” (Kristof, 2003, p. A25).

Abortion

In 2002 the National Cancer Institute (one of the NIH institutes) removed information from its Web site documenting the absence of evidence for an association between abortion and breast cancer. In the face of protest, the institute convened a conference on the topic and later updated its Web site to reflect the scientific consensus (National Cancer Institute, 2003; “Research Grants,” 2003).

Abstinence Only

A report commissioned by Congressman Waxman, presented to Congress in December 2004, documented errors and distortions in federally funded, abstinence-only curricula, including false and misleading information about the efficacy of contraception and the safety of abortion (U.S. House of Representatives, 2004). Waxman also charged that “HHS has changed performance measures for abstinence-only education to make the programs appear successful” (Waxman, n.d., ¶2).

Community-Based HIV Education

At least 15 of the most prominent community-based AIDS organizations in the United States were audited by the DHHS following a protest targeted at DHHS Secretary Tommy Thompson at an international AIDS conference (Kaplan, 2004, p. 21). The San Francisco-based Stop AIDS Project was investigated repeatedly over 14 months, receiving special scrutiny after Congressman Souder accused them of obscenity (Smith, 2003). Each time the agency was cleared of any wrongdoing, but after Souder persisted, the CDC informed the organization in July 2003 that their workshops were in violation of the Public Health Service Act, which prohibits federal funding of any materials that “promote or encourage, directly, homosexual or heterosexual activity” (Block, 2003, pp. 5–6). More recently, the CDC has proposed a stiffening of the procedures for approval of any written or visual materials related to HIV produced with federal funding (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004).

AIDS Conferences

In 2004 DHHS announced that only 50 of the 90 government scientists whose presentations had been accepted for the International AIDS Society conference in Bangkok

would be permitted to attend (“U.S. Charged,” 2004; Walgate, 2004).

Morning-After Pill

In May 2004 the acting director of the FDA’s Center for Drug Evaluation Research rejected not only the advice of the agency’s expert advisory committee but also that of his own staff when he refused to permit over-the-counter sales of an emergency birth control medicine designed to prevent the implantation of a fertilized egg. Former FDA employees said it was “unheard of” (Harris, 2004, p. 13) for a high FDA official to overrule the recommendations of both an advisory committee and agency staff. In 2005 the agency again delayed approval of the medication.

Beyond Autonomy: The Politics of Knowledge About Sex

The previous list of flash points suggests a consistent and perhaps coordinated attention to questions of sexual knowledge within the DHHS.⁷ Indeed, the preoccupation with the production and dissemination of knowledge about sexuality points to the tight intertwining of two sorts of political struggles: those over the meanings and uses of science, and those over the cultural scenarios that tell people what sort of sexuality is right, proper, and desirable. Here, a set of actors—some located within government and others in the ranks of advocacy organizations, mostly though not exclusively drawing on conservative Christian doctrine—sought to shore up traditional cultural scenarios that they saw as embattled. These actors found it both sensible and strategic to advance their cause by attacking a knowledge production enterprise that seemed, through its emphases, to take for granted and even endow with legitimacy the kinds of cultural transformations that they abhorred. It mattered little that researchers were not endorsing gay bathhouses, truck stop prostitution, adolescent sexuality, or any of the other topics whose social consequences the researchers on the hit list wanted to track. The simple idea that anyone could describe such activities with dispassion was enough to set off opponents. That researchers proposed to expand the font of knowledge about these activities—and thereby place alternative sexualities more squarely in public view—made the research agenda an anathema.

⁷Some critics have fingered Claude Allen, a staunch social conservative and former aide to Senator Jesse Helms, as the key player, in his capacity as Deputy Secretary of Health and Human Services from 2001 to 2005, in orchestrating these projects (Ireland, 2005). In March, 2006, Allen was arrested by police in Maryland and charged with theft (Urbina & Kirkpatrick, 2006).

While the defenders of cultural conservatism have emphasized the link between the politics of knowledge and the politics of sexuality, the defenders of sex research mostly have shied away from this intertwining of concerns. They have done little to counter the relative absence, in mainstream political discourse, of well-articulated alternatives to the conservative and religious representations of sexuality. Instead, they have adopted two primary lines of defense. First has been the insistence on the public health significance of research such as that targeted by Congress and social conservatives like the TVC. While this argument is important and entirely appropriate in the case of NIH-funded research, one consequence of the near exclusive reliance upon it is that the rationale for sexuality research tends then to center on the link between sexuality and disease, especially sexually transmitted infections. This argument then sidesteps the question of whether sexual health might be conceived of in broader terms that extend beyond the medical model—or whether such conceptions merit study.⁸

The second, and probably the primary, official response to the recent round of attacks on sexual freedoms and sexuality research in the United States has been a vigorous defense of the autonomy of science. Over and over again, liberal politicians, scientists, columnists, and advocacy groups have decried the intrusion of politicians and other outsiders into the process by which the scientific community decides which research has merit. This framing plays well in the U.S. political context, making it nearly irresistible to beleaguered defenders of sex research. Yet it is not without its own difficulties, especially when presented without nuance. The notion that the domains of science and politics can or should exist entirely separate from one another, with the former uncontaminated by the latter, bears little if any relation to what science studies scholars describe as the normal workings of science, now or in the past (Gieryn, 1995; Harding, 1986; Jasanoff, 1990; Latour, 1987; Shapin & Schaffer, 1985). Nor are right-wing critics such as Lafferty wrong to propose that, in a democratic polity, citizens should have a say in how tax dollars are spent and in how public agencies go about their business. Indeed, though Lafferty would be unlikely to raise these examples, the noisy but sometimes quite productive contributions of AIDS and breast cancer activists

⁸Moreover, the justification for sexuality studies on the grounds of health impact alone does little to counter the cultural scenarios invoked and reinforced by social conservatives or to put forward alternative imaginings of how diverse sexual experiences might bring pleasure and meaning to people's lives. Neither does it open up space to imagine the possibility that a society might choose to invest funds in studying sexuality for its own sake.

to the research process stand as refutations to the notion that biomedical science magically functions best when left to its own devices (Epstein, 1996). Thus, adopters of the autonomy of science frame potentially find themselves on politically and epistemologically shaky ground, even as they leave quite to one side the question of how to think about sexuality itself.

The familiar difficulty here is that of managing the tension between promoting participatory democracy and deferring to expertise. While undoubtedly there is no global solution to this problem, the example of AIDS activism cited above does provide one sort of model that may have broader applicability. In my previous work (Epstein, 1996) I examined the conditions that permitted AIDS treatment activists to make positive and beneficial contributions to the biomedical research process in the late 1980s and early 1990s—an instance of the politicization of science and invasion of the experts' turf that I believe is defensible. On the one hand, activists' contributions depended on the marshaling of local knowledge and lay expertise that reflected their situated understanding of the practical dilemmas confronting AIDS patients. Thus AIDS activists had something important to offer, and the credentialed experts benefited from hearing them out because it meant they could design clinical trials that would function more effectively. On the other hand, activists displayed enormous dedication to the task of learning mainstream science—indeed, researchers acknowledged activists' impressive capacity to master the minutiae of immunology, virology, and biostatistics. Most crucially, AIDS activists were deeply invested in the scientific process at the same time as they mounted their critiques of specific practices and practitioners. For obvious reasons committed to the goal of advancing knowledge about AIDS and producing effective treatments, treatment activists could not afford the luxury of endorsing scientific arguments just because they found those arguments politically useful. To the contrary, practical necessities generally (though of course not always) worked to ensure that activist interventions with regard to clinical trials would be based on scrupulous self-education, careful assessments, and sincere concerns with validity, reliability, and efficacy—not on an opportunistic endorsement of whatever seemed consistent with predetermined political stances.

Alongside the task of distinguishing among better and worse sorts of politicization of science, there is a related problem: how to defend scientific findings without falling back on indefensible and unreconstructed notions of scientific objectivity and the scientific method (Haraway, 1991; Kinchy & Kleinman, 2005). This problem has been heightened by the increasing tendency for right-wing

critics of modern scientific conclusions, on issues ranging from sexuality to climate research to evolution, to adopt the mantle of science themselves and to deploy their own array of counter-facts, counter-studies, and counter-experts (Irvine, 2005a; Latour, 2004). How does the epistemological constructivist respond to such a challenge without self-contradiction? How can we identify “good science”? It is a difficult question, though also one that has been obscured by misleading claims by opponents of science studies about what it means to provide a constructivist account—such as the suggestion that social constructivists believe that reality is just whatever those in power claim it to be (Sokal, 1996).

Examples such as that of AIDS activists help point the way toward reasonable ways of drawing distinctions among different sorts of interventions in scientific research by outsiders, without falling back on unreconstructed positivist notions of objectivity or the necessity of preserving the autonomy of the scientific field. When science is under political attack, an effective and appropriate response might be neither that of calling for the return of science to the experts as their personal property nor that of inviting the participation of anyone who holds any sort of opinion, the more the merrier. Instead, we need to pursue the difficult project of identifying the social conditions under which particular kinds of interventions—those that take science seriously and eschew political opportunism—are likely to make scientific practices more efficacious as well as make scientists more accountable. While grassroots activists are one sort of actor that can play a productive role of this kind, other groups, such as advocacy organizations concerned with sexuality policy, can and do adopt analogous approaches.

In calling for more nuanced critiques of the attack on sexual knowledge production that go beyond simple defenses of the sanctity of the peer review process, my goal is not to trumpet the virtues of utopianism over pragmatism in difficult political circumstances. Instead, we can benefit from serious study of the complex politics of producing knowledge and producing the unknowable (Hilgartner, 2003; Proctor, 1995). By developing a more thorough empirical analysis of the dynamics of credibility struggles over the content and generation of sexual knowledge, we can begin to gain a clearer understanding of the broader processes by which states, social movements, advocacy groups, and scholars compete to say what sexuality means and what places it might hold in our lives. Such understandings are critical for those who seek to explore new avenues of productive political engagement on these questions in ways that advance scientific understanding.

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