The First Feminist Sex Research Reception at the International Academy of Sex Research

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The First Feminist Sex Research Reception¹ at the International Academy of Sex Research (IASR) occurred on August 11, 2011, at the Los Angeles conference. It was an exciting event—exciting to plan, exciting to attend, and exciting to follow up on.

I organized the reception with my colleague, Terri Conley. We both have research programs primarily devoted to sex research though we use very different approaches. In addition, we are both jointly appointed in Psychology and Women's Studies at the University of Michigan. Our overlapping positions and sensibilities as feminist sex researchers helped foment our concern with the lack of visibility for feminist sex research as well as its dispersion and lack of organizing force or community, especially at IASR. Plus, we were acutely aware of its lack of parties. We were committed to addressing these issues as best we could.

I approached Dr. Conley with the idea of the reception and she enthusiastically agreed. Though we originally thought to request funds from our departments to sponsor the event, we realized that we could each put forward some of our discretionary funds given our joint interest. We went about selecting an evening that contained no other IASR planning and a location that might be appropriate for a reception. Initially, I explored the possibility of a community room in the conference dormitory, which culminated in a call from an IASR officer wondering what sort of wild party we were planning (I was flattered, in part, to be thought capable of such revelry). Dr. Conley instead found The Glendon Bar & Kitchen, which contained a reservable private upper level for no charge so long as we paid for a quota of food.

We invited a few senior feminist scholars we knew as special guests to help make the event attractive. We were delighted to have enthusiastic acceptances from Lisa Diamond, Cynthia Graham, Stephanie Sanders, Ine Vanwesenbeeck, and Leonore Tiefer, who represented major scholars, past-presidents of IASR and/or SSSS (Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality), the Editor of the *Journal of Sex Research*, and who were interested in mentoring junior colleagues. We used informal means to pass the word out, including fliers at IASR (we were actually concerned about the potential anti-feminist backlash a more formal effort might engender; no small concern given that we are both pre-tenure). Word spread about the reception and we were excited about the buzz.

Is a feminist reception needed at IASR? We felt that organizing an event would help build community among a disparate group of scholars with a shared commitment to feminist approaches. We also felt that some students might be interested in feminist approaches but not have access to feminist scholars and that the reception would help build a network for them. Other experiences, at IASR itself, helped to make clear just how important the feminist reception was. For example, a number of male trainees tossed anti-feminist epithets at two of my ultra-polite Midwestern students, who were holding a sign directing people to the reception. These outspoken conference attendees then told my students that no men would be at the reception, to which one of the young men *standing with my students* responded “Well, I’m going.” To which these lovely young inclusive conference attendees clarified “no *straight* men.” I’m not exactly sure whether these men were suggesting that events

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¹ More accurately, this was the first feminist sex research reception at IASR in the twenty-first century. There was a feminist meeting at the 1986 IASR meeting in Amsterdam, which led to the founding of the WRNSWG network (World Research Network on the Sexuality of Women and Girls) in 1991, which itself met the day before each IASR conference from 1995 to 1999 (L. Tiefer, personal communication, October 25, 2011).

attended primarily by women and queer men are worthless, that “men” are straight (and thus that queer men aren’t really men), or if they were getting concerned about increasing their entitlement factor score and making it clear that any opinion they had was worth airing, but these anti-feminist and homophobic sentiments are one indication of how important the reception actually was.

The reception itself surpassed even our most lofty expectations. Fully one-quarter of the IASR attendees attended our reception,² another compelling piece of evidence that a feminist reception was relevant and filled an important need. Accordingly, this reception helped to identify a critical mass of feminist sex researchers who came from a variety of disciplinary approaches. This diversity in approach helped to make it a place for people who might not fit into other more disciplinary feminist spaces, and also for those exploring what feminist sex research might involve.

So what *is* feminist sex research? At the reception, scholars identified various themes to start the conversation. Some identified turning a feminist lens on *results*, to consider the realities of living in gendered worlds when interpreting findings, while others pointed to the importance of feminist considerations in selecting *questions*. People discussed the need to situate women’s sexuality in more *diverse discourses* than just health, and the need to focus on *pleasure*. Some pointed to *men and masculinity*, the need to involve male allies or confront hegemonic masculinities. *Social justice* was critical to many. People suggested moving away from *heteronormativity in theories and measures*. Some discussed *power* in terms of current and historical differentials between genders and social groups but also in terms of scholarly and academic institutions. Others mentioned *inclusion* and *intersectionality*, and the importance of diverse voices (e.g., by race/ethnicity, age, social location, etc.)

in sex research for both the researchers and the researched. Some scholars discussed choosing topics that were *applied*, that could make a difference in the lives of women and men (e.g., by addressing gender- and sexuality-based diseases). Our reception was clearly a place for diverse modes of feminist sex research. I also suspect that a few folks attending the reception simply sniffed out a good party.³

There were some who could not attend the reception (they found out too late and had other plans, they had travel mishaps), including some prominent feminist scholars in sex research whom we had unfortunately failed to notify. And, maybe some of you were curious—after all, you’re committed to gender equity—but couldn’t quite get yourself there. Well, dry those tears: our reception started something *big*. During the reception, we asked “What next?” because our intent was to foment both a community and a body of feminist sex research. Happily, people wanted to answer and the enthusiasm and excitement initiated during the reception is building and being translated into activity. It has only been two months since the reception, but here are some of our planned events. First, we plan to hold a Second Feminist Sex Research Reception in Lisbon 2012, so start planning your party outfits. Second, there’s this editorial you are reading. Third, growing out of the reception, Alice Dreger and I are organizing a mini-conference at Northwestern University⁴ on feminist sexuality research with a focus on addressing the problematics of biobehavioral feminist sex research. Plans are also underway to organize a sexuality research preconference at the 2013 Society for Personality and Social Psychology conference that is, in part, hosted by feminist sex researchers (e.g., Lisa Diamond). We have other grand hopes and plans, including crystallizing the network of feminist sex researchers and establishing some joint scholarship ventures, and this *we* maybe includes *you*, or it could.

² IASR secretary David Moskowitz estimated 190 attendees at the IASR conference and independent estimates of attendance at the reception were 50 attendees, indicating that 26% of IASR attendees also attended the reception.

³ Wow, we even had *gate-crashers*!

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