

Studying Sex

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Developing research with a specific focus is an important step as an early career psychologist, but choosing to specialize so soon also has its difficulties. When a researcher has an unconventional primary interest, such as human sexuality, sometimes a carefully plotted course must be navigated between mainstream and niche research. Researchers who are considering a niche approach have to weigh whether the rewards outweigh the challenges they will face, and to figure that out, it's necessary to ask some tough questions.

Will I Be Able to Collect Good Data?

In every field of psychological science, barriers against collecting good data are a concern, particularly when using college students as research participants. When studying sex attitudes, demand characteristics and the social-desirability bias are major obstacles to collecting reliable data. Demand characteristics occur when participants attempt to conform to the researcher's expectations (Orne, 1962). In survey designs, participants may answer items in ways they believe the researcher wants them to, regardless of how they actually feel. Social-desirability bias happens when participants respond to items in a way they feel is socially acceptable (MacLeod, Hickman, & Smith, 2005). Studies on taboo subjects, such as sexual behavior or drug use, can encounter both of these obstacles. Samples collected from college students might be particularly problematic because there may be a high degree of peer pressure, and participants may be less than forthcoming about how many sexual partners they have had. Additionally, undergraduate research participants may exaggerate their sexual experience, depending on the sexual standards of their peer groups.

Unfortunately, there is no way to overcome demand characteristics or social-desirability bias completely. The language in the informed-consent form and the tone of the researcher can reassure participants that their responses will be anonymous. Plus, if a researcher earns a reputation for running ethical studies, students may be willing to participate in more of them and contribute good data.

Will I Be Able to Get Funding?

To conduct experiments, researchers need money. Many organizations provide grant money for interdisciplinary research, but for researchers working on under-studied areas, obtaining funding can be difficult. Organizations are more likely to provide money for research that is built on years of reputable study. Granting agencies are also less inclined to provide money for newer research, particularly if it is associated with a societal taboo. Some groups willing to fund niche research exist, yet they can be difficult to find. The Association for Psychological Science Student Caucus has created a database for funding opportunities (http://psychologicalscience.org/index.php/members/apssc/online_funding_database). The database is a great place to start any search for funding. For example, sex researchers can apply for grants provided by the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality.

Will I Be Able to Get Published?

For academic psychological scientists, publications are critical. Working in a specific field, however, limits the number of journals in which researchers can potentially publish their work. Journals with a broad focus, such as *Psychological Science*, may accept submissions for papers reporting any type of empirical psychological research, but many journals have a narrower focus. For example, the *Journal of Sex Research* and the *Archives of Sexual Behavior* are both reputable journals that publish research on sexuality. It can be helpful to read past issues of any journal prior to submitting a paper for publication to determine if a particular research topic will be favorable to the Editor.

Will I Be Able to Get a Job?

For graduate students aspiring to have a career in academia, research on a niche subject can be a hiring concern. Prospective faculty members need to demonstrate that they have the ability to maintain a robust program of research and the potential to obtain outside funding. Prospective faculty members with mainstream research interests typically have an easier time meeting these criteria. But a researcher with narrow interests, such as non-normative sexual behavior, may encounter hesitation among hiring committees who do not see how a focus on a circumscribed topic could benefit to the department. Some universities may also have certain standards for student conduct that could limit a researcher's ability to obtain good data. For example, an addiction researcher would have a difficult time studying alcohol-consumption behavior at an institution that prohibits all students from consuming alcohol. It can be beneficial for applicants to have some more topically conventional publications because researchers who perform niche research tend to be labeled. While being labeled as a "sex researcher" would be beneficial when applying for a job at the Kinsey Institute, that label would be less desirable when applying for a job at a small religious institution. Having a more mainstream line of research can also demonstrate an ability to build on established theory and contribute to traditional areas, which makes one more marketable. A more obscure research interest can always be put off until after gaining tenure.

Summary

Though these obstacles may seem insurmountable at times, they can be overcome. Performing research in a niche field can be harrowing, with institutional review board clashes as well as struggles for legitimacy, funding, and employment. But conducting research outside of the mainstream can also be extremely rewarding for researchers who wish to contribute unique information and paradigms to the field. Not to mention, sex researchers never lack cocktail party stories.