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INVITED COMMENTARY

Sexuality in the Global South: 50 Years of Published Research in the *Journal of Sex Research*—Inclusions, Omissions, and Future Possibilities

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Sexuality researchers from a range of disciplines have called for more global inclusiveness in sexualities research, particularly in the Global South (GS). We investigated the degree to which sexuality researchers have published work focused on the GS by conducting a content analysis of 50 years of research published in the Journal of Sex Research (JSR). We examined all research articles, brief research reports, and clinical notes published in JSR from 1965 to 2014 (N = 1,626). Overall, a small percentage of articles focused on the GS with no increase over time (4.8%; N = 78). Articles in the GS focused on Asia (37.2%), Latin America (28.2%), Sub-Saharan Africa (23.1%), the Middle East (6.4%), and a mix of GS regions (5.1%). Topics related to sexual and reproductive health were most prevalent (19.2%), followed by articles on sexual risk, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) (17.9%), sexual norms, attitudes, and beliefs (16.7%), sex work (11.5%), cultural practices (10.3%), gay, lesbian, and bisexual issues (9.0%), intimate partner relationships (3.8%), and sexual violence (3.8%); the remaining categories (transgender and transsexual populations, sex research methods, sex testing, and women's sexuality) were negligible. We conclude with recommendations for improving the quantity, quality, and scope of global sexuality research in JSR.

In an increasingly globalized and interconnected world, sexual practices, identities, and ideologies must be conceived of as not solely local but as also transnationally negotiated and produced (Altman, 2004; Held & McGrew, 2000; Lind, 2011). Given growing evidence of the complex social, cultural, and epidemiological impacts of globalization, sexuality researchers from a diverse range of disciplines have increasingly called for more global inclusiveness in sexualities research (Altman, 2001; Correa, Petchesky, & Parker, 2008). At the same time, these calls for more global research sometimes have widely divergent rationales. For example, researchers from public health and the

social sciences often prioritize research that tests theory with empirical evidence for the purpose of generating generalizable knowledge, which then can inform evidence-based policies and programs. Researchers from anthropology, history, and the humanities—disciplinary traditions which may prioritize specificity over generalizability, depth over breadth of understanding, and postmodern and postcolonial theoretical framings—often situate their global scholarship as an intervention against over-determined generalizations about sexuality. In contrast, researchers drawing most directly from universal human rights perspectives focus on the global connections (and disconnects) between sexual identity expressions given differing cultural contexts.

Awareness of these divergent traditions of research, scholarship, and advocacy are important for generating both depth and

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breadth of understanding about sexualities. But with the exception of a base of work by anthropologists and sociologists, the lack of global research inclusiveness on sexualities is stark. The imbalance appears particularly evident when searching for sexualities literature focusing on the Global South (GS) (Sub-Saharan Africa, South, Southeast, and parts of East Asia, Central and South America, and the Middle East). Despite the fact that the large majority of the world's population lives in the GS, research on sexualities in the Global North (GN) (North America, Europe, Australia, and parts of East Asia) is dominant across many disciplines as well as within leading sexuality-related journals (Binnie, 2004; Wieringa & Sivori, 2013).

This trend of GN dominance is of course not limited to sexuality research. Indeed, disproportionate power is built into the very concepts of GN and GS. Much more than simply navigational terms to locate disparate geographical regions, these are “relational term(s)” that refer to “an unevenness of geopolitical power relations both historically and in the contemporary period” (Brown, Browne, Elmhirst, & Hutta, 2010, p. 1568). With this context in mind, we turned to the following question: To what extent does the *Journal of Sex Research* (*JSR*), the first-ranked journal in the interdisciplinary social science category (2014 *Journal Citation Reports*, 2015), address sexualities research in the GS?

The Evolving Scope of The *Journal of Sex Research*

JSR is a scholarly journal dedicated to publishing research articles which come from a wide variety of perspectives and which contribute to interdisciplinary understandings of sexuality. It is the official journal of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality (SSSS). Making its debut in 1965—a time when the study of human sexuality was a nascent discipline in the United States—*JSR* created an early platform for bringing together the growing number of researchers engaged in the scientific study of sexuality and for disseminating knowledge in the field (Davis, 1977; Lehfeldt, 1965). While *JSR*'s aims and scope have remained largely unchanged since its inception, the theoretical, epistemological, and topical scope of its articles has expanded over time to reflect developments in the sexuality field and has increasingly incorporated references to race, gender, and other modes of identity and inequality. One route through which to quickly observe these changes in *JSR* over time is to examine the topics that are included in the journal's special issues, which focus on new, important, and/or cutting-edge content in the field of sexual science. Along these lines, *JSR* has published special issues organized around such topics as feminist perspectives on sexuality (1990); anthropology, sexuality, and AIDS (1991); sexuality and ethnicity (1996 and 1997); sexuality and the Internet (2001); and the medicalization of sex (2012).

Following the 25th anniversary of *JSR*, Wiederman, Maynard, and Fretz (1996) undertook a similar analysis endeavor as ours but focused on ethnic diversity in the journal's publications. In their article, “Ethnicity in 25 Years of Published Sexuality Research: 1971–1995,” Wiederman and

colleagues found that a description of ethnicity in the sample or ethnicity as a variable was included in only 7.3% of *JSR* research articles over this time period. They concluded that there was a “deficit” in empirical work focused on ethnicity in *JSR* (as well as other sexuality journals) and that “only time will tell” as to whether this deficit would be corrected. While there are many similar analyses worthy of examination (e.g., by sexual orientation, sex/gender, disability, theory and methodology), here we examined the question of global location and asked specifically: What is the distribution of sexuality research in *JSR* focused on the GN versus the GS? No previously published research has examined the extent to which researchers who publish their work on sexuality in *JSR* have placed their attention on the GS.

We selected *JSR* as our target for analysis for several reasons: it is the longest-running journal specifically dedicated to the study of sexuality; it is the top-ranked journal in the interdisciplinary social science category; and it also recently celebrated its 50th anniversary, offering a timely window in which to reflect upon its history and contemporary practices. By including articles from the point of inception of the journal to the present day, we covered nearly a half-century of sexuality-related research.

Our objectives for this research were threefold. First, we documented the proportion of articles that focused on topics or populations centrally located in the GS, including an examination of changes in proportion over time. Second, we evaluated the content in articles focused on the GS to specify both the country/region and the topic of research. Finally, we considered how *JSR* might play an increased leadership role in featuring high-quality research scholarship focused on the GS.

Method

All articles published in *JSR* between 1965 and 2014 were evaluated for inclusion in the current study. Original articles, research articles, brief reports, and clinical notes were included. Letters to the editor, commentaries, invited commentaries, miscellany, review articles, and media and book reviews were excluded. Articles were coded as having a GS focus if the article primarily explored populations and/or topics in GS countries (e.g., if the article focused on a GS country or region exclusively or, if two countries or regions were the focus, one was in the GS). Articles focused on the GS were then coded according to the geographic region of the article: Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia (South, Southeast, and parts of East Asia), Latin America (Central and South America), or Middle East (Western Asia and Egypt). Finally, GS-focused articles were content-coded according to the primary sexuality topic examined. The number of GS articles was also noted for each special issue published from 1990 to 2014. While *JSR* published special issues prior to 1990, they were not consistently and clearly labeled as such until the year 1990; therefore, only special issues starting in this year were included in our analysis. All articles were reviewed and coded independently by all three authors; discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus.

Results

Across all of the issues, 4.8% ($N = 78$ of 1,626 articles) focused on sexualities in the GS. Over the years, the percentage ranged from 1.5% ($N = 3$) from 1985 to 1989 to 8.0% ($N = 23$) from 2010 to 2014. There was no increase in GS articles from 1965 to 2014, though there was a noticeable increase in the number of GS articles during the 2010 to 2014 period (Table 1).

Of those articles that focused on the GS, the continent of Asia was most frequently represented (37.2%), followed by Latin America (28.2%), Sub-Saharan Africa (23.1%), and the Middle East (6.4%); 5.1% were focused on a mix of GS regions (Table 2). Nearly one-fifth of these articles (19.2%) focused on sexual and reproductive health (including family planning and abortion). The next most frequent domain examined sexual risk, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) (17.9%), followed by evaluations of sexual norms, attitudes, and beliefs (16.7%), sex work (11.5%), analyses of cultural practices (10.3%), gay, lesbian, and bisexual issues (9.0%), and intimate partner relationships and sexual violence (3.8%). The remaining categories were found in less

than 3% of articles (issues that included transgender individuals, sex research methods, sex testing, and women's sexuality) (Table 2).

Because special issues are known for stretching the boundaries of existing research topics and practices, such issues might be a place where one might expect to see content on the GS; however, this was not the case in *JSR*. For example, despite the fact that feminist movements play a major role in several regions of the GS, particularly when focused on sexual and reproductive health in Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa (Desai, 2005; Gaway & Mukasa, 2005; Petchesky, 2003), *JSR*'s two special issues on feminist perspectives on sexuality in 1990 contained no articles on sexuality in the GS. In the 1991 special issue on anthropology, sexuality, and AIDS, there were no empirical articles focused on work in the GS even though anthropology has been fairly well versed in HIV research in this part of the world.

Starting in 2009, *JSR* incorporated the *Annual Review of Sex Research (ARSR)* as an annual special issue. Despite *ARSR*'s reputation for presenting a cross-disciplinary mix of scholarly reviews across a wide range of sexuality topics, the number of GS-focused articles did not increase. Overall, the 23 *JSR* special issues from 1965 to 2014 contained only five (2.3%) articles focused on the GS (data not shown). These findings, coupled with the low number of GS articles published overall, are indicative of a dearth of emphasis on populations in these regions of the world.

Table 1 *JSR Articles Focused on the Global South, 1965–2014*

Decade	Total Articles n	Global South Articles n (%)
1965–1969	125	8 (6.4)
1970–1974	136	10 (7.4)
1975–1979	112	4 (3.6)
1980–1984	95	2 (2.1)
1985–1989	196	3 (1.5)
1990–1994	151	9 (6.0)
1995–1999	163	6 (3.7)
2000–2004	176	5 (2.8)
2005–2009	183	8 (4.4)
2010–2014	289	23 (8.0)
Overall	1,626	78 (4.8)

Discussion

Clearly, 78 articles focused on sexualities in the GS over a 50-year period of research (4.8%) does not represent an adequate focus on sexualities in the GS by any measure. This is particularly the case when one considers that the 1960s and 1970s had some of the highest proportions of work focused on sexualities in the GS; scholars have

Table 2 *JSR Articles Focused on the Global South, 1965–2014, by Region and Topic*

Topic	Region n (%) Global South Articles					Overall
	Asia	Latin America	Sub-Saharan Africa	Middle East	Global	
Sexual and reproductive health	7	6	1	1	0	15 (19.2)
Sexual risk, STIs, and HIV	3	3	8	0	0	14 (17.9)
Sexual norms, attitudes, beliefs	6	2	3	0	2	13 (16.7)
Sex work	6	2	0	1	0	9 (11.5)
Cultural practices	0	1	5	1	1	8 (10.3)
Gay, lesbian, and bisexual issues	1	3	0	2	1	7 (9.0)
Intimate partner relationships	1	2	0	0	0	3 (3.8)
Sexual violence	1	2	0	0	0	3 (3.8)
Transgender and transsexual issues	2	0	0	0	0	2 (2.6)
Sex research methods	1	1	0	0	0	2 (2.6)
Sex testing	0	0	1	0	0	1 (1.3)
Women's sexuality	1	0	0	0	0	1 (1.3)
Overall	29 (37.2)	22 (28.2)	18 (23.1)	5 (6.4)	4 (5.1)	78 (100)

Note. Total number of articles = 78.

highlighted that these were years when there was a known colonizing lens that led to a research and program focus on overpopulation and fertility (Clarke, 1999; Lewis & Mills, 1999). Of the 22 *JSR* articles focused on the GS from 1965 to 1979, half were focused on family planning or abortion, and many of the family planning articles put an emphasis on explosive population growth. Since this time, work on family planning has shifted, with the advent of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, to a broader emphasis on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Notably, *JSR* published no family planning or abortion articles focused on the GS after 1974, possibly due to the rise of other scholarly journals focused on reproductive health and related fields, and less than 10% of *JSR*'s GS articles overall explored issues related to sexual health and rights.

While sexual and reproductive health topics dominated GS articles published in the 1960s and 1970s, sexual risk was the most prevalent topic starting in the 1990s and was particularly common in articles about Sub-Saharan Africa. These findings are reflective of the disproportionate impact that the HIV/AIDS epidemic has in Sub-Saharan Africa and also reflect the way the epidemic is perceived in this region of the world in terms of populations at risk (Dworkin, 2015; Patton, 1990, 2002).

Several remaining points about regional and substantive emphases that were underrepresented are worth noting. Only five articles on the Middle East were published in 50 years: Three of these articles focused on ancient societies, leaving only two articles that were published on sexuality in the contemporary Middle East. This gap is at odds with the extensive scholarship in SRHR in this region. In addition, there has been increasing recognition of the need to address the SRHR of young people, particularly in developing countries, but only 10% of GS articles included youth under age 18 in their study samples. And despite recognition in sexuality studies (and beyond) that it is important to investigate not just the sexually marginalized but also the sexually privileged, as well as to study across the sex/gender spectrum (Connell, 1987, 1995), only 5% of articles included samples of heterosexual men. In addition, of the articles focused on gay, lesbian, and bisexual issues, nearly all of these studies included gay men and only one included lesbians and one included bisexual women. Finally, only two articles in the entire 50-year period focused on transgender populations.

The primary limitation to the current study is related to our method: Because the central goal of content analysis is to determine what content has been published and what has been left out, the method is not effective for determining why the current trends are in fact occurring. However, we see a number of possible explanations for the low proportion of articles focused on the GS. First, it is possible that manuscripts from GS authors have a lower acceptance rate to *JSR*, potentially due to language challenges, such as lack of familiarity with English as a first language. Another potential explanation is that researchers are in fact carrying

out work on sexualities focused on populations in the GS but are submitting their work to other journals and elsewhere. A third possibility is that sexuality researchers in the GS may be more likely to work in applied settings and hence are writing reports for a broader audience than can be reached via research journal articles. Yet as we elucidate in the next section, even with each of these possible explanations we see several opportunities for *JSR* to expand its global focus.

Next Steps

Given its leadership position in the field of interdisciplinary social science publications, we see this as an opportune time for *JSR* to expand the breadth of its existing high-impact articles by increasing the quality, quantity, and scope of its global sexuality research. Below we offer several suggestions toward this end via strategies of outreach to GS researchers; broadening *JSR* readers' and reviewers' awareness of GS sexualities and North–South power dynamics and politics; and enhancing interdisciplinary research and collaborations.

Increasing Outreach

A first and perhaps obvious strategy to increase the quantity of GS articles would be to make a concerted effort to encourage researchers and scholars in the GS to submit their work to *JSR*. This can be accomplished through website statements and journal editorials that make it clear such work is welcome; special issues that feature such work; outreach at conferences; and advertisements in social science journals operating in GS regions. These outreach/advertisement materials should also highlight that, as of 2014, SSSS started an initiative to provide editing services for a limited number of authors per year whose first language is not English. Funding could also be sought to expand this service to make it available to more authors and to ensure this service is sustained over the long run.

Increasing *JSR* Readers' and Reviewers' Awareness of Research on Global South Sexualities

In addition to making attempts to recruit more submissions from GS researchers, it is critical that current readers and reviewers of *JSR* expand their awareness of sexualities scholarship produced by researchers in the GS. This will ideally help readers and reviewers of *JSR* recognize and critique the deployment of a Western lens to understand GS meanings, understandings, experiences, and categorizations of sexualities (Bancroft, 1999; Brown et al., 2010), as well as understand how sexuality studies are contextualized within legacies of colonialism and postcolonialism (Binnie, 2004; Wieringa & Sivori, 2013). Therefore, it is important, in McLelland's words (2006), to "move beyond" the "reductiveness of approaches which locate the sexual cultures and

practices of ‘other’ societies along a continuum of sameness versus difference from those of the West” (2006, p. 1).

Toward this end, *JSR* editors and contributors can consider ways to expand discussions of GS research at the SSSS annual conference through, for example, special sessions on sexualities in the GS. As well, *JSR* might allot journal space for forums discussing the politics and epistemologies of sex research in a number of arenas including the GS. All of these efforts could help contextualize and foreground the experiences of both participants and researchers in studies focused on the GS, making the journal itself a broader educational forum for *JSR* readers.

Enhancing Interdisciplinarity

In tandem with efforts to expand *JSR* readers’ understanding of the relationship between global power and knowledge of sexualities in the GS is the importance of encouraging interdisciplinary research contributions and collaborations. For example, our analysis discovered that much of the published research in *JSR* to date appears to have focused on the individual level (sexual norms, sexual risk behavior), a level of analysis that tends to represent work from psychology and public health. In contrast, much research on sexualities in the GS has been carried out in the disciplines of geography, anthropology, sociology, history, and women’s studies—disciplines which often use organizational, cultural, or structural levels of analysis.

In addition, many scholars in the GN, particularly in the United States, have argued that it is critical for researchers to not assume that populations are homogeneous; rather, it is important to recognize internal distinctions and differentiations and their intersections such as race, gender, class, religion, and sexualities (Bowleg, 2012; Cole, 2009; Dworkin, 2015; Dworkin, Fleming, & Colvin, 2015; Watkins-Hayes, 2014). Similarly, when GN researchers carry out research with populations in the GS, it is critical for them to not treat groups as homogeneous and to not transpose the dominance of the “race, class, gender” triad that is so popular in the United States onto other regions because religion, ethnicity, age, nationality, or other social locations may be equally or more important.

Previous critical analysis of public and global health funding and research has found an emphasis on disease, fertility, pregnancy prevention, and curbing excess sexuality that leads to “health” “problems” but a dearth of studies on pleasures, sexual health, sexual justice, and sexualities in the plural (Higgins & Hirsch, 2007; Philpott, Knerr, & Maher, 2006). Such cautions about the limitations of individual-level, disease-focused analyses are echoed by critical scholars’ assessments of dominant sexualities research around the globe (Epprecht, 2008, 2013; Hoad, Martin, & Reid, 2005; McLelland, 2006). Hence, it is likely that interdisciplinary contributions, especially those focused on the GS, may help expand not just the journal’s global scope but also its methodological and epistemological foci, and increase representation of varying levels of analysis.

One strategy toward attracting more interdisciplinary contributions and/or collaborations could include inviting top scholars from the fields mentioned to conduct panels or workshops at SSSS conferences; another would be to create a special series of articles in *JSR* featuring interdisciplinary South–North or South–South research teams. *JSR* could also consider building its reviewer base for article reviews and adding interdisciplinary sexuality researchers and sexuality researchers from the GS to the editorial board to help researchers be cautious about oversimplifying and essentializing GS sexualities. Essentialism is the assumption that certain sexual practices or ways of being are part of a core essence of a group in a certain region; an example of an essentialized sexual stereotype includes racist assumptions of primitive, lustful, savage, or barbarian others in Sub-Saharan Africa, which are then translated into an exoticizing theoretical framework (Epprecht, 2008, 2013; Hoad et al., 2005). Although sexuality researchers may not intend to reinforce such a framework, without a concomitant focus on the historical forces and socioeconomic and sociocultural contexts that shape sexualities, analyses of sexual practices can inadvertently reinforce ideas about individual- or group-level essences that are rife with assumptions about “culture” (Colvin, Robins, & Leavens, 2010; Patton, 1990).

Finally, while *JSR* is best known for publishing high-quality empirical work, according to its mission statement it also publishes “theoretical essays, review articles, methodological articles, commentaries, and letters to the editor.” These spaces may be seen as more welcoming for scholars and researchers trained outside of the social and health sciences, and hence could be a window for outreach to interdisciplinary sexuality scholars who may be publishing in other journals.

In conclusion, through our analysis of the past 50 years of sexualities research in *JSR*—and with the noted critical reflections, cautions, and suggestions in mind—it is our hope that this article will lead to much dialogue and will provide the *JSR* editor, associate editors, consulting editors, reviewers, and readers with ideas that lead to lasting and impactful changes in the journal.

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