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# Sexuality: a risk or a right? Conceptualisations of sexual expression by personnel in disability services

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## Abstract

Most people adhere to an understanding of sexuality as a fundamental human need, which includes the right to sexual expression and sexual health. However, the sexuality of disabled people is often disregarded, in cultural contexts as well as in disability services, where personnel often lack adequate competence to be able to handle sexual expression in a non-discriminatory way. This presentation is based on a research study concerning the thoughts and experiences of personnel in Swedish personal assistance services about sexual expression in their work with mobility disabled people. Specifically, the concept of sexual facilitation is discussed, i.e. the assistance potentially needed for assistance users to be able to express their sexuality as desired. Individual interviews were conducted with 15 personal assistants and three focus group discussions were conducted with ten managers. The informants worked mainly with municipal and private service providers. Results show that the specific characteristics of Swedish personal assistance services influence how sexual facilitation is conceptualised and handled. For example, since sexuality is not mentioned in the rights-based law governing disability services and its preparatory work, or in other types of regulations and guidelines, several personnel either do not expect having to work with the assistance users' sexuality, or are very insecure about how to handle upcoming situations. Furthermore, the law that the services are based on, aiming to give the possibility for individualized services, leads to a great discretion for personnel in handling sexuality according to their personal values and norms, which are sometimes discriminatory. Hence, the silence of sexuality in disability policy, combined with a lack of organisational support for learning about and working with sexuality, may lead to assistance users being unable to express their sexuality in the desired way, which in the long run, may reproduce disabling structures hindering equal citizenship and participation in society. **This abstract is suggested to be part of the session Sexuality: a measure for citizenship and inclusion.**

**Keywords:** sexual facilitation, personal assistance services, independent living, sexual citizenship

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