

SOCIOLOGY OF SEX EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN

David L. Petty
Stephen F Austin State University

NEED OF A SOCIOLOGY COURSE

Two significant developments are taking shape in sociology. First, through the Teaching Newsletter, members of the American Sociological Association are trying to create renewed interest by sharing innovative ideas and techniques in teaching sociology. Success in teaching effectiveness may be the best defense against declining enrollments. The second development is a resurgence of concern for applied sociology. Gardner called it "real doctoring for sick societies" (1978: 68). The sociology enterprise is broad enough to unite academic, clinical, and applied interests.

"A primary family function is to regulate sexual behavior." Students in introductory sociology have been hearing such a statement for many years, since it seems to be on everyone's list of family functions. But it represents only an ideal norm. Sex education in the typical American family is poor, or non-existent. Therefore, we have developed a course designed to reduce sexual ignorance and the myriad problems resulting from poor sex education. This course also aims to strengthen parent-child relations, and to demonstrate that children may be important objects of sociological research.

COURSE OBJECTIVES The course has four objectives: 1) to develop student awareness of the problem; 2) to develop some understanding of why the problem exists; 3) to develop knowledge of the results of the problem as they impact on society; and 4) to suggest ways to confront the problem.

For the academic objectives, considerable historical information, research findings, and statistical data must be presented. Evolving

cultural factors, changing value orientations, and socialization are considered as they have influenced the "sex is evil" syndrome. An overview of changing sexual attitudes and behavior from the pre-Christian era through Puritanism and Victorianism up to the present is reviewed and discussed. Finally, current data on teen-age pregnancy, rising rates of venereal disease, and other indicators are used to demonstrate the magnitude of the problems associated with sexual ignorance.

The fourth objective brings the students into the area of application. If unintended pregnancies, rising rates of venereal disease, lack of fulfillment, and feelings of guilt associated with sexual intercourse are largely due to sexual ignorance, and deficient and defective sex education, the solution should begin at the source. The problem is potentially solvable by effective sex education.

There is a dearth of material regarding prevention and anticipation of sexual behavior problems. Most efforts toward solution are only reactive. Both private and social agencies are more oriented to treating unintended pregnancy and venereal disease after the fact, than with undertaking effective preventive programs. Reactive programs are necessary, but not to the exclusion of the preventive programs.

COURSE CONTENT

Sociology of Sex Education for Children has been offered six times, with 20 of the total of 180 students enrolling for graduate credit. It is an upper level course, with no prerequisites.

Students are asked to prepare a written perspective on sex, in which the student decides what is important, what is necessary, and what is preferable, regarding sexual behavior. Each student is encouraged to integrate biological fact with value orientations, thereby becoming better able to address questions regarding

sexual attitudes and behavior. Class members are then urged to maintain their perspectives in light of social, cultural, and individual changes, so that their perspective becomes a dynamic tool for sex education.

Besides the traditional teaching methods of lecture and discussion, the course is amenable to more innovative techniques. Early in the course, some sexual graffiti are used. On large sheets of paper, 7 or 8 technical and scientific terms related to sex are secured to the walls of the classroom. Felt-tip pens are placed by each sheet, and class members are asked to walk around the room and write more common expressions for such technical terms as "coitus". When they finish, volunteers are asked to read a list of words from one of the sheets. The purpose is to develop individual awareness of one's knowledge of cultural vernacular expressions, and to get in touch with one's own sexuality. Student reactions range from nervous to embarrassed, to reluctance to participate in either the writing or the reading of the sex-related terms. Probably such reactions can best be explained in terms of cultural conditioning, and in terms of the sexuality of each person. Most students find this a helpful exercise.

Student group work is another helpful technique. On occasion, the class is divided in groups, and asked to discuss a real or hypothetical problem involving sexual behavior. Following the discussion period, a representative orally presents the group solution and reaction to the problem. These resolutions always involve expressions of value judgments, which is the overall object of the exercise. Such sessions are very effective.

In response to an idea suggested by former students, a role-playing exercise was developed. A short script was written to portray a brief encounter between a father and his son, concerning a

sexual matter. The aim was to teach by showing "how not to do it." The instructor played the role of the father, and a graduate assistant played the son. Discussion following the dialogue indicated that the intended message was clearly received. A second script shows an encounter between a father and his daughter.

STUDENT QUESTIONS & CONCERNS

Once students realize the goal which we are approaching, they sometimes grow impatient to reach it, and to become effective sex educators. Their most common questions are: 1) When is the best time to begin sex education with a child? 2) What is the best way to begin sex education? 3) Who is the best educator? Answers developed over the past 3 years are compilations of the research and writings of others, and the shared experience of class members. Discussion of these questions and answers has proved useful and informative.

We have learned that sex education is a life-long process. The parent who is in touch with his or her own sexuality will be most sensitive to what sons and daughters say or do. Because children are learning so early, even their infancy is a time for sexual beginnings. For example, the parent who moves an infant's hand from its genitals during a bath or diaper change is communicating negativity about behavior (DeLora & Warren 1977).

A new beginning may occur each time the child comes to the parent with a question about sex. Usually, the sex educator will have some idea for formulating an answer. The best answers are short and concise for younger children, to satisfy their immediate concern without raising new issues. For older children, the answer should be straightforward, with more elaboration. Since the onset of puberty marks the beginning of significant biological changes, questions must be handled with more

sophistication and sensitivity. We divide the ideas and suggestions into two areas: 1) those dealing with younger, pre-pubescent children, and those for dealing with pubescent and post-puberty youth.

Parents are fortunate when their child comes to them with a question about sex. Parents can help themselves at this point by being approachable, and by developing an air of responsiveness. Parents can also take the initiative. An excellent way to do that with the younger child is to turn the tables by asking: "How do people get babies?" The child's response to the question should help the parent know where to go from there. (Bernstein 1977)

Dealing with older youth about sexual matters has shown the importance of presenting information in an informative, sincere, non-moralizing manner. Parents and other sex educators do well not to couch what they say in dogmatic commands. Instead, an honest sharing of sexual values will give the child viable and rational alternatives in coping with the physical and social aspects of sexual development.

Finally, who should be the sex educator? The ideal is the two-parent team. Insights from each parent are useful for both sons and daughters. Some situations may call for "together" sessions, and others may be better handled by parents successively, talking alone with the young son or daughter. As suggested above, role-playing sessions which show various combinations of father, mother, daughter, and son interactions will convey these possibilities. Since this course brings together both men and women to discuss sexual matters, we hope that an openness will be created with will carry over to future interactions with children.

CONCLUSION The sociology class is a rewarding, interesting, and challenging experience. We in the academic portion of the discipline

have a growing need to be creative teachers, both in content, and in procedure. We owe our students our best efforts in maintaining vitality along with academic content in the discipline. The development of a new course entitled "Sociology of Sex Education for Children" has enabled students and the instructor to address several important issues, both in the local academic community, and in the larger society. 1) We experiment with some new techniques in the classroom. 2) We reach an expanding number of students, which helps curb loss of enrollment. 3) We create an awareness, and possible solutions for a major social problem. 4) We attempt to create a profitable union of academic and applied sociology.

REFERENCES

- .Bernstein Ann 1977 How children learn about sex and birth. Powers & Lee, eds. Encounter with Family Realities. St Paul West
- .DeLora Joann S, Carol A B Warren 1977 Understanding Sexual Interaction. Boston Houghton Mifflin
- .Gardner Hugh 1978 Second thoughts: some 'real' doctoring for sick societies. Human Behavior September 68-69
- .Jensen Gordon D, Mina Robbins 1975 Ten reasons why 'sex talks' with adolescents go wrong. Human Sexuality Jul 7-23
- .Katchadourian Herant A, Donald T. Lunde 1972 Fundamentals of Human Sexuality New York Holt Rinehart Winston
- .Linkletter Art 1976 How kids find out about sex. Plain Truth Oct 16
- .McCary James L 1978 Human Sexuality 3rd ed New York Van Nostrand
- _____ 1975 Freedom & Growth in Marriage. Santa Barbara Hamilton